Dud Cigarettes

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Dud Cigarettes

by <u>hydralilies</u>

Summary

And if Dream's not humming, he's 'click, click, click'ing that godforsaken tongue piercing against the backs of his teeth; almost as if to taunt George. To remind him of its existence.

There are so many *little* things that make up Dream. It's the way he fiddles with the rings on his fingers, spinning and dislodging them over and over. It's the way he hardly says anything; leaving the room for a majority of the day and only returning at midnight with a smile and mulberry marks on his neck.

For Dream, this arrangement is probably paradise.

For George, it's sweet, sweet torture.

Or, Dream and George are college dormmates. That's all they're *supposed* to be. But for George, Dream becomes a hidden obsession of his; one that's jarring and unexpected. Luckily for George, Dream may be able to help more than first thought.

Hello! And welcome to my new multi chapter project!

I'm very excited to start this! Basics first:

This is a university AU, where dnf are roommates and Dream is confident in himself and is kind of a (hot) deviant. George is infatuated by him, but he's not sure why:)

Also this is a bit different than how I normally write- I wanted to experiment with a more... vague (?) style, or one that describes events more generally rather than delving into every little action and detail. I'm still getting used to it, so I apologize if it's a bit confusing. I had some friends beta and tell me what I needed to clarify, so hopefully it's a smooth read!!

I've mapped the fic out, and I think it'll have about seven chapters (tentatively). Brief warning: it'll be a bit of a slow burn, and there'll be angst, which I don't usually do. BUT I'm super excited to share my ideas with you all! Also, warning for internalized homophobia, because that's a major part of this fic. Tags will be added as I go on.

Twitter

If Dream and/or George ever say they're uncomfortable with shipping/nsfw, this fic will be immediately taken down.

See the end of the work for more notes

Silver and Smoke



That is, until it's not.
Because suddenly he's <i>everywhere</i> . He's smoke filling his airway, he's the smell of rainfall tickling the back of his throat, he's the glimmer of polished silver in his eye.
He's standing right in front of him.
In his dorm room.
To say George is bewildered would be an ocean-deep understatement. He's floundering a bit, lips parting without sound passing between them. The suitcase in his hand slips and slides against accumulating perspiration on his palms.
The man isn't even <i>looking</i> at him.
He's glued to his phone, idly lingering next to the bed shoved to the left-most wall. His belongings are strewn across the barren top of his mattress; several split and frayed IKEA brand bags accompanied by a few weighted bins. There's a matte guitar case leaned away from his mess, delicately rested against a barren expanse of tack-holed plaster at the foot of the bed.
Its surface is blanketed with stickers. Some old and worn, some new and sleek, some of brands George recognizes, others of logos he's never seen before.
His gaze snaps up to the oakwood strands on the crown of the man's head. George never noticed, but it's darker at the roots. Lighter at the ends. Slightly shaggy, falling in waves over his brow and sweeping loose curls along the curve of his nape.
And it's not until George uncements his feet from beneath the doorway that clarity at <i>last</i> finds peace in the blurry corner of his mind. Because the boy raises his head at the sound of footsteps.
George immediately notes the color of his eyes- <i>yellow? Green?</i> His colorblindness rears its head at the most inopportune times.

There's a disarming smile to his lips; smug and comfortable in the way it's presented. He's got a strong jawline, sturdy and coiled tight, smattered with light stubble. But George has to steady his breathing when his gaze falls upon the nose, eyebrow, *and* lip studs. The metal falls in sync with the rings on his digits; glinting with reflected sunlight cast from the dingy window on the far wall. And *well*, George applauds himself a bit when he skirts across the splash of hazel freckles on his cheeks and nose. The apples of his cheeks have subtle color to them, which George can only discern as a ruddy blush.

Fashion isn't something he typically associates with men, but even he can admit the man is stylish.

A dark, black jumper drapes over his shoulders, cuffs falling just past the jut of his knuckles. There's a white collar peeking above the hem, curled delicately just below the swell of his Adam's apple (a button-up, most likely). Equally baggy jeans equipped with rips and fraying threads drown his legs until they reach concealed ankles, hidden by white socks.

George forces his gaze to re-settle on the bemused face that's now peering at him with a look of intrigue.

"Hey." He speaks.

George thinks he sounds like the rustle of leaves in the prelude to cloudburst, or the taste of honeyed jasmine tea, or the caress of a gentle touch. If it were a hand, it'd be calloused and friction-lined around the edges, yet graceful in its movements; smooth and caring.

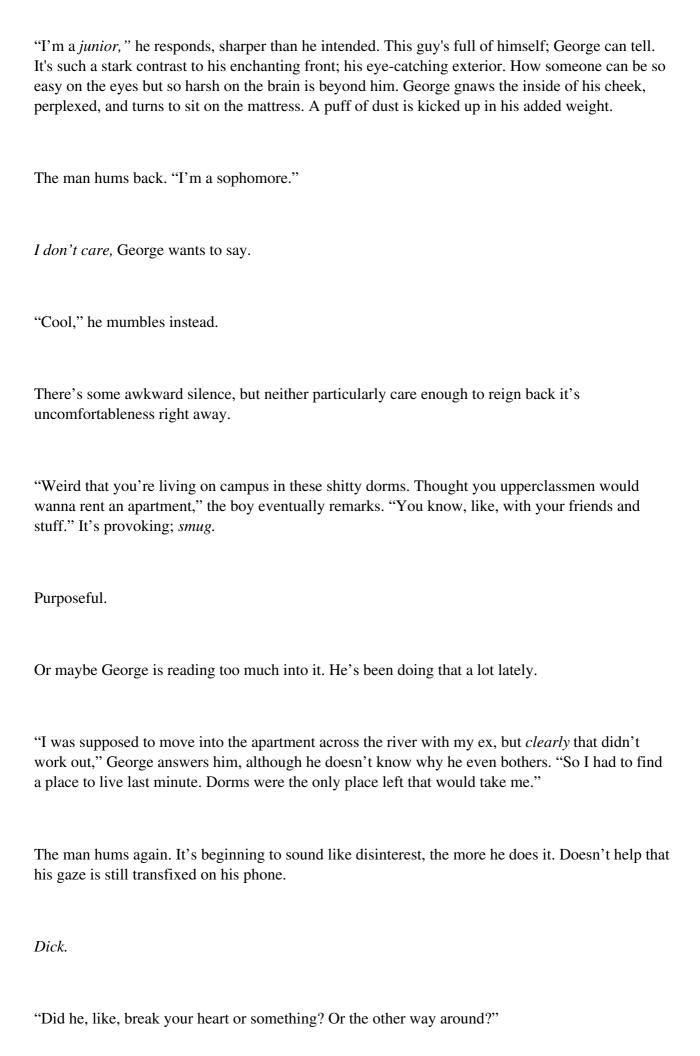
He doesn't know why he's assaulted by this vivid imagery. So, he ignores it, and clears his throat.

"Hi," George responds. He takes a few steps towards the right side of the room- his. The strap of his backpack falls from his shoulder and lands heavily onto the bed, frame creaking at its joints in protest.

"You're a freshman."

Why the statement *isn't* posed as a question is beyond George. And it's then that he registers the snide lilt to the man's lips; the cocky, boisterous way he's framed against decades-worn walls.

It irritates George to a subtle degree.



Oh, so <i>now</i> he's asking questions.
"That's none of your business," George starts. "And no, <i>she</i> didn't dump me. Just, some stuff happened. <i>Personal</i> stuff."
Another hum.
Anger boils dangerously beneath the surface of George's skin.
"Sorry about that." The man stretches, and <i>clicks</i> his phone off. "Guess you're stuck here with me."
"Yeah," George mutters, "guess I am." He tucks his knees up beneath his chin, looping both arms around his shins. The man eyes this motion curiously.
"Well, I'm gonna go get a bagel from the shop down the street. You want anything?"
George cocks an eyebrow. He doesn't understand this guy.
"Uhm," he sputters, "no, I'm good, I think."
His roommate chuckles, and <i>oh wow</i> , okay. It's low and gritty sounding, rough as turf yet downy as feathers or smooth as melted chocolate. <i>Great</i> , more things to associate with him.
"You <i>think?</i> " he questions back at him, slipping on white, lace-up shoes. He grabs a lanyard from the hook next to the doorway, slinging it around his neck with practiced ease. "Just tell me your favorite kind of bagel, princess."
George thinks he should feel diffident and indignant from the nickname, but it hardly registers. "Asiago."

"That wasn't so hard." He turns heel, grasping the knob and jiggling it a few times to shave rust off the inner mechanism. His rings <i>clink</i> against the metal; silver on gold reflecting shards of light. George is blinded temporarily by looking just a <i>little</i> too intensely. "I'll be back."
And like that, he's gone. The door slams shut, and George is left in solitude.
Until he isn't.
Because the door swings back open abruptly, and a freckled face is peering through it. "My name's Dream, by the way."
Oh right. He doesn't even know this guy's name.
But <i>Dream?</i> George scrunches his nose up. "That's not your real name."
And this <i>Dream</i> just laughs, gently. George tastes jasmine-flavored chocolate at the back of his throat.
"No, but it's a name."
He lingers by the doorframe, waiting for something.
Oh.
"George," the brunet grits out, eventually.
Another smile splits across stretched, pink lips. George notes that Dream has quite pronounced canines.

The blond shoots him a boyish, toothy smile.

"Alright. Be back soon, *Georgie*." Then he's gone again. And George is left with a jaw half-agape, in the shape of a prepared curse for the improper nickname.

But, there's nothing left to do. He sighs to himself, and begrudgingly gets to his feet.

Setting up his side of the room is practiced; precise and methodical. In his third year, he's been moving in and out of cramped spaces for a *long* time, and it seems like muscle memory to him, now. Throwing sheets over the twin-sized mattress, setting picture frames of his family and friends on the nightstand (there's a frame he leaves in the box; it doesn't belong in his room anymore), tossing clothes onto hangers inside the meager excuse of a wardrobe. He's pinning a worn poster of *The Hoosiers* above the head of his bed when the door creaks open again.

George glances over his shoulder to find Dream loitering about the entrance, an *Einstein's* bag gripped in one hand while he examines the decorated side of the room.

There's a strange, metallic clicking noise. George notes that all his jewelry is idle.

But then Dream is opening his mouth. "Here's your bagel, Georgie."

With a roll to his eyes, George shuffles out of his kneeling position on the bed, sliding pale legs off the mattress to sit on the side.

And maybe George shouldn't have been paying *this* much attention to his lips, because *oh*. A flash of metal glitters behind an ivory set of teeth, and another *click* rings out. It feels deafening in George's ears, although he knows it's probably unnoticeable.

"You have a tongue piercing," George finds himself saying without permission. His face heats up in meek embarrassment.

Luckily, Dream just laughs, slipping off his shoes and padding to where George sits. Now that he's *this* close, he realizes just how *tall* Dream is.

Definitely tall enough to tower over George.

The families	ssence of smoke overwhelms his senses until there's a stutter to his breathing.
	o." Dream doesn't elaborate. Instead, he places George's bagel in his lap and turns to s desk chair.
They don't	speak for the rest of the night.
realized roo	It sure what he expected, when Dream dissolves from wisps of smoke into a fully- ommate. They were still practically strangers, even two weeks into their arrangement. orge doesn't necessarily find <i>odd</i> , per-se. He just feels strangely antsy about the whole
He's not su	re why.
lunch, or w	s to rationalize the feeling a multitude of times; while he's sitting on a bench during hen he's lounging in bed, watching Dream from the corner of his peripheral. Or even crammed in the back of his organic chemistry lecture hall, and his hand eludes him in her notes; too engaged in his daydreams to get tendons and muscles to twitch.
	is roommate. They should see each other once in the morning, once at night. It's a putine; the way George has survived for all three years of his university experience.
And yet, Di	ream never leaves him.
strands. The and there's	g metal paints the backs of his lids while the trees he passes morph into honey-drenched e cigarette butts on the pavement linger long after they've been crushed into concrete, an incessant <i>click</i> , <i>click</i> to the way some kid taps his pen against his desk. The tts him for the rest of the day.
There are a	lso whispers. George can't discern whether he's imagined them or not, at times.



He's memorized and filed away every small detail of the man across from him, analyzing the way he chews his lips 'til they're peeled and red, and the way he pulls half of his hair into a ponytail at the crown of his head, the way he carries himself; <i>confident</i> and <i>cocky</i> and <i>smug</i> .
Not to mention the way Dream's guitar case has sat, untouched, collecting dust at the foot of his bed. George can't help but allow curiosity to take control of his sight; eyeing the damned thing at least once a day.
But, as all things do, George's infatuation mellows out.
They're three weeks into the semester, and their first exams are steadily approaching. Dream has been staying in a lot more recently; spending most nights bent awkwardly over his desk, looming above a MacBook that irks him because of how small and narrow the keys are. George's brain <i>loves</i> to remind him just how <i>large</i> Dream's hands seem to be, especially when they're clumsily dancing across a keyboard, or raking through his hair, or <i>gripping</i> his comforter when he prepares to leap onto it.
The blond is tall enough to loft his bed and completely disregard the stool beneath him.
George has a three-tier step ladder.
Dream had looked as if he was going to laugh at him the first day, but instead he just smirked, and kept his thoughts to himself, like always. It almost frustrated George, to some degree.
Why?
He isn't sure.
And now, George is watching Dream. Again.

For George, it's sweet, sweet torture.

Ivory pages on his lap are filled to the brim with graphite smears. Every word and letter he's written blurs together when his focus drifts away from the recorded lecture on his laptop screen.
Dream looks particularly different today.
Instead of his normal suave attire, he's dressed down in an oversized pullover and sweats that hug the curve of his thighs a little <i>too</i> well. His digits are barren of the normally-acquainted decor of shiny jewelry. George thinks his finger pads are probably calloused and rash as they flit across his keyboard.
He'll never know if they are or not, realistically.
So George's brain fills the gaps, imagining rough skin drifting over his own; large hands skirting along the expanse of his knuckles, his palms, his <i>wrists</i> .
An unsteady breath leaves George's lungs in a rush as he observes the subtle furrow of dark-blond brows.
His piercings are gone.
They sit abandoned on his nightstand, indistinguishable amongst the mess of sterling silver studs.
George stares at his lips, as if he can peer through flesh. He imagines a tongue devoid of metallic enhancement, and wonders if it lay amongst the pile on the table, or if it's still-
Click, click, click.
Ah. That answers that question.
Dream's face seems much rounder, much <i>softer</i> , without the adornation of man-made material. While George's gaze is normally inclined to hone-in on the shimmer of studs, <i>now</i> , all he wants to do is appreciate how long his lashes are, how abundant his hazel freckles seem, and how gentle the curve of his upturned-nose is.

There's a scar just below his left brow.
George looks away.
All of it makes him wonder why he even wears the damned things.
He can be shallow and narrow it down to Dream's desire for sex-appeal, which seems to do wonders for him if the whispers on campus paint a vivid enough story. Or, maybe, he can think Dream wears them for himself.
George decides it's the former. He doesn't want to think about it too much.
Dream starts coming home late again.
Or, not at all.
It isn't uncommon for him to slink back to the dorm at unholy times, ranging from one a.m. to six a.m. He's cognizant enough to keep the lights off, to pad lightly across the carpet, and to slip beneath his covers without so much as a rustle.
But George is a light sleeper.
Sometimes, there are two voices outside the door, before Dream opens it. Muffled giggles and light talk. If George strains hard enough, he can make out what they're saying.
He doesn't.

And other times, Dream's alone.

George knows when he's had a poor outing, based on the heaviness of his steps, or his disregard for properly hanging up his jacket. The *thump* of fabric across his desk chair is indication enough.

And just the same, he knows when Dream's in the clouds; when his footsteps are light and downy as feathers, when there's a smile to the way he guides himself to the foreign warmth of his own comforter.

George hates that he's curious.

Hates that he wants to pry. Hates that he wonders which lips and tongues bring out the tenderness in the soles of his feet. Hates that he desires to know the faces of those who have chained anchors to his ankles and created a tempest; merciless in the way he shucks his jacket off his shoulders much earlier into the night than normal.

On the bad days, George tries for conversation.

He'll sit up in bed and feign innocence, as if he *hadn't* already noted the heaviness of his heels or the sour smell of a dud cigarette. Rub his eye as if to drain grogginess that hadn't existed in the first place.

"What's wrong?" He'll ask.

Dream will huff, silhouette bathed in cool luminescence of the half-moon.

"Nothing. It was my fault."

George will watch Dream shoot him a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes, and watch as he asks him if he wants a bagel in the morning.

And then they'll fall asleep.

Now, it's a chilly Thursday morning, and Dream had one of his 'good outings' the night prior. He invites George to accompany him to the *Einstein's* across the street, instead of going alone, like normal. It doesn't feel weird to be sidled against Dream in the elevator, nor does it feel awkward when they make idle chatter crossing cracked pavement, worn by millions of students' feet in its lifetime.

It doesn't even feel weird when Dream orders for him. George wonders why they don't do this more often.

That is, until he *notices*.

Notices the darkened color of plum and bursted capillaries just below the jut of his Adam's apple; peering at George with vice. *Taunting* him.

There's a strange sort of dull knock against his chest at the sight, but he swallows it down alongside the asiago bagel wrapped in frozen pale fingers.

On their way back, George goes silent. He can't stop staring at it. And it's infuriating him.

And Dream, well, Dream notices.

Maybe he pays more attention than George thought, when he stops just outside their door. He turns to face him, a curious glint smothered in vicious emerald irises.

"What are you staring at?" Dream asks. It's not judgemental, and George even thinks it sounds a bit cocky; *knowing*.

George tries to ignore how quickly his cheeks fill with blood, glancing to the side and letting his eyes fall somewhere along the split foundation in the wall. He wishes he hadn't finished his bagel so fast; his fingers and mouth feel restless. So he gnaws the dried skin of his lips.

Dream's gaze wavers when George answers.

"Those look like they hurt." He dodges Dream's accusation with slight, faked ignorance.

George doesn't have to *look* to know there's mirth melding with taunting viridian green.

Doe eyes trace the movement of Dream's arm as he brings a palm to cup the side of his own neck, rings reflecting artificial light from the bulbs overhead. George foolishly thinks they look better with refracted sunlight instead.

"They did," he answers.

George feels his tongue go dry as deft fingerpads drift over mottled violet and indigo bruiseshickeys- peeking above the curl of his collar. He swallows, thick as paint. And Dream just cocks his head, smirking around his next words, "And I liked it."

George rationalizes the emotion tying knots in his chest to be irritation; annoyance at this guy's lack of shame, his incessant arrogance and snarky remarks. Yes, that's it. He purposefully ignores the fluttering in his stomach when Dream's thumb presses into a particularly saturated mark.

Questions boil on the tip of his tongue, but he can't seem to get any to launch.

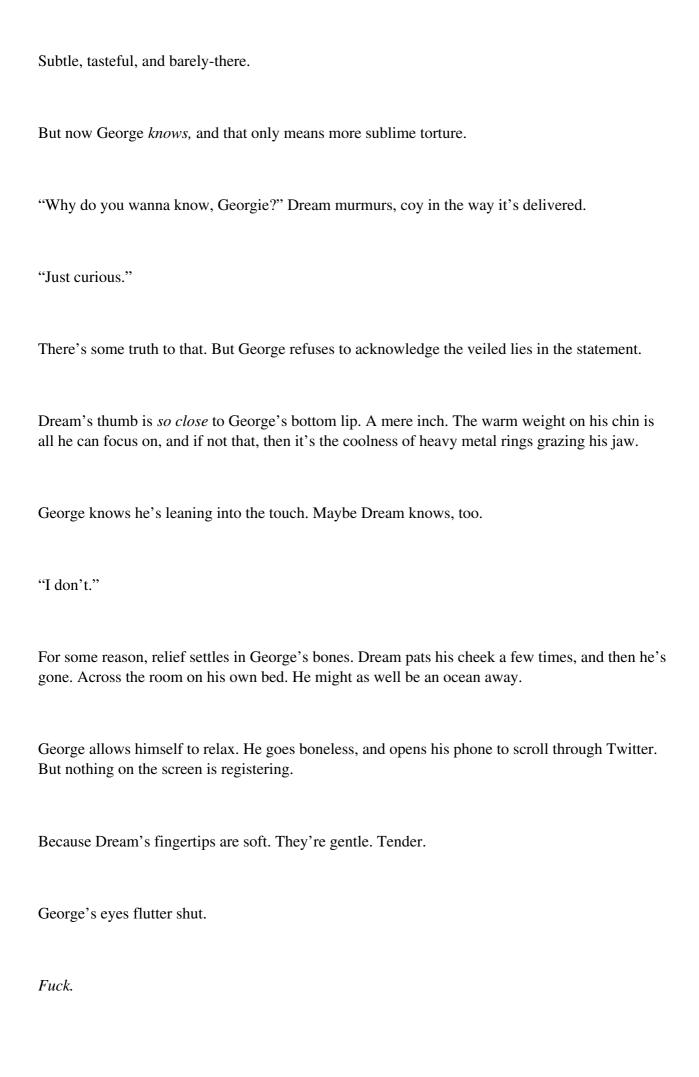
So they head back inside, and George kicks off his shoes before climbing atop his bed to lay flat. Dream is fiddling with something just outside his field of vision. George squeezes his eyes shut to avoid staring again.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" he blurts.

The room goes still.

Light footsteps. The dwindling fragrance of windswept rainfall fills George's lungs. He knows Dream is looming next to him. He refuses to open his eyes, because of this very notion.

But a warm palm decides for him, cradling his jaw and shocking George's eyes ajar. They flutter rapidly in the wake of Dream's fingers brushing against untamed stubble, guiding a startled face to the side. Their eyes meet, and George can't breathe. Can't swallow. Can't *move*, under the scrutiny of piercing green and the realization that Dream wears *eyeliner*.



George tries. He really does. Tries to busy himself, to occupy his time by going to restaurants with friends, or studying at the library, away from the comfort of a bed and the glint of facial piercings. And if Dream notices how much time he's been spending away from the dorm, he doesn't mention it. The distractions feel as if they're working. Until they're not. And George is back to daydreaming in lecture halls and shuffling through perplexing images behind ignorant lids. He feels stuck, in a way. Because Dream is quicksand, and George is sinking faster, faster, faster. People-watching becomes his full-time job. Because at least these people aren't *Dream*; they aren't brazen golden boys with metal in their skin and an ego to rival the Gods. They're just... people. George observes his classmates in chemistry, most often. The hall is massive enough to conceal his gaze, sitting in the last row to avoid judgemental eyes. Brown irises sift through his peers, attempting to retain the smaller details of these people, because if he can do that, it means Dream

The girl three rows down from him is beautiful.

isn't special. It means George isn't weird for feeling how he feels.

Chestnut hair swept into a high ponytail, loose fringe framing the smooth planes of her face. George blinks, and all he can see is oak wood. His breathing slows. She has acrylic nails, long and shapely, delicately smoothing eraser shavings from her notebook. It's quite colorful within the confines of noir binding; headers bolded in turquoise and letters neat and orderly. Before metal jewelry and soft fingertips can cloud his vision, he sweeps his gaze down.

Here, like this, George can admire her figure, and the way her hands seem lithe and delicate, or how her lashes are long and thick with the enhancement of mascara. Even the button of her nose, rounded and sculpted for the loveliest of profiles, is something of beauty.

He can sit here and appreciate how gorgeous she is.

That's not difficult, at all.

But then he tries thinking *more*. About her hands, and how they'd feel in his. He's thinking about her cherry-petaled lips on his own, his palms on her waist, her breasts against his chest.

Anxiety swirls a pit of tar in his stomach when he's abruptly swept into the body he owned a few months ago. The *past*. George has to squeeze his eyes shut when his misfortunes pull him under. Memories flash like lightning behind his lids, seeping into his bones and chaining him to their grasp with lock and key. There's the severe feeling of hesitance, unsure fingers hooked into a pink blouse, an angry, feminine face with frustration on her tongue. Confusion-laced fear nestles an arrow straight through the slats of his ribs, and then there's the memory of muffled yelling; a mixture of his own voice and someone he used to know. *A lover's spat*. Except this one would end in a slap to the face, the clicking of marching heels, the frantic tugging of suitcases from dusty closets, and the slam of a guilt-ridden door.

And then, silence. Emptiness.

George can't look at the girl anymore. Bile claws at his throat, and he shuffles his feet against the dusty floor beneath his seat.

War-torn fingers thread through his hair, and he *pulls*. His heart is hammering against his ribcage; he's sure the girl three rows down can hear it.

And so, he looks to the person next to her.

A young man. Sharp-jawed, jet-black hair with a buzzed undercut. He's dressed in a salmon button-down with blue jeans, a sweatshirt draped across the back of his seat and a watch about his wrist.

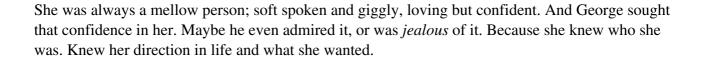
Handsome, George decides.

But there's this strange emotion bubbling up his tongue when he observes the subtle arch of his brow, and the slope of his nose. The way his lips are shapely and rosy, the way his hair falls haphazardly into his vision, the way the top few buttons of his shirt are undone, exposing an expanse of olive skin. And how his sleeves are rolled up his forearms; muscles and tendons flexing and rippling under smooth skin with each note he takes.

George is hit with the realization.
This man is <i>pretty</i> .
Defining him as <i>handsome</i> does little justice.
George has never found a man pretty before.
His breathing gets labored when he gazes at strong, large, corded hands. When he stares at sculpted lips for a bit too long. When he thinks about bulky fingers pressed into the skin of his waist.
And, oh god, George needs to leave.
Because the girl is leaning over the arm of her seat, cupping a hand around her mouth to whisper a string of words to the man. Because they're laughing with each other, and his arm is around her shoulders. Because they're leaning in for a <i>kiss</i> .
George is out the door within seconds.
Nausea builds in his throat, shakily walking away from the realizations he'd left abandoned in his seat. The sounds of his footsteps echo off the abandoned hallway of the building complex.
Click, click, click.

The sound lingers for much longer than it should.





And, at the time, George thought he knew, too.

But the phantom feeling of a normally-gentle palm cracking across his cheek makes the pit in his stomach grow tenfold. It makes him remember *why* he's in this predicament in the first place.

Her shrill voice disrupts the fog in his mind.

"You need to figure this out, whatever it is that's going on with you. And I can't help you do that. That's on you."

George sighs, and drops his phone into the nest of his comforter. He rolls over, and falls asleep with the low light of the lamp casting warm shadows upon the walls.

Of course, he doesn't sleep for long. He *can't*, not when a hurricane of slamming doors, boyish smiles with pointed canines, unbuttoned shirts, and polished studs continuously hammer against the hollow of his brain. The images ricochet over and over and *over*, until George jolts awake with a groan.

He's breathing *hard*, and he soothes uneasy lungs with a palm pressed to his heart. His clock reads twelve twenty-two.

With a long exhale, George slumps back into the cavern of his sheets. He turns and faces Dream's abandoned side of the room. It's predictably barren; Dream has no posters, no pictures, no souvenirs. And it just makes George more curious.

Dream is a mystery.

He's a disappearing act, a slight of hand, the depths of the ocean. A sour taste floods George's mouth when he recalls how strong the urge is to explore the uncharted land that is *Dream*. He wants to map the man out; learn the ins and outs of his character, claim the parts of him no other

gets to see, and peer within the confines of tanned skin and devious looks.

It's such a violent, vicious feeling. A foreign one, too.

Never before has George experienced this type of obsession; one he has to keep under wraps and futilely ignore until it eats him alive.

George bundles himself tighter beneath the blankets, as if their feigned protection will somehow shield him from Dream's snare. At the same time, his eyes betray him; catching the neck of Dream's guitar case peeking above the foot of his bed.

It's still untouched. George wonders why.

He feels like a jester- a *fool*, while Dream is the icy knight in the corner of his eye; face hidden behind brass chainmail and metallic armor. He comes and goes, disappearing behind brick walls and melding with the dozens of other soldiers. Yet, George still seeks him out. Tries to memorize the little things about him; how his brandished shoulder pads are always freshly polished with oil, how a tuft of golden hair peeks from the gaps in his helmet, how there's a jarring scratch just above the left breastplate. He does it all just so he can attempt to quell his intrigue.

But it never seems to be enough.

There's barely time to process the sound of boots on carpet before there's a *click* of the door unlocking. George freezes, and slips his eyes closed.

Regret churns angrily in his chest when he remembers *why* he desires to seem like he's sleeping. Despite this, his ears analyze anyway; honing in on each sound emanating from the new presence in the room.

The footsteps today are somewhat indistinguishable, at first. George thinks he may have had a bad outing, when rubber soles clunk noisily against the floor as the lock returns to its previous position. But then, there's the gentle rustle of leather, and his coat is neatly hung up on the hook beside the door. Bitterness blankets George's tongue.

He's had a good night.

George can just tell. And he hates that he can tell.

Boots slip off, and socked feet pad across the rug between their beds. They halt, right in the center of the room, which is *not* normal. George simmers the urge to furrow his brow.

There's a few tense moments of silence. Not even the shuffle of cloth or the monotonous *clink* of jewelry against enamel breaks the surface tension hovering above the room.

Finally, he can tell when Dream moves. Thankfully, away from where George's face displays fake slumber.

The curiosity in his stomach is a horrible, *horrible* thing.

At the first sound of fabric, George allows his lids to crack open. He adjusts to the influx of warm light from his bedside lamp, before letting his gaze fall upon broad shoulders and *miles* of bronze skin, and...

Oh.

George doesn't think his mouth should go this dry, at the sight of his roommate shirtless. But it does, nonetheless, and he doesn't think he can stop himself from eyeing the man without restraint. Feebly, he blames it on exhaustion, for caring so little.

Dream's faced away from him, shirt in hand, phone in the other; eyes trained on the dimmed screen. George almost feels bad for taking advantage of Dream's distraction; *almost*.

The planes of his shoulder blades and nape are sharply defined and *wide*. They just make the curve of his waist look even *smaller*, which George didn't think possible. He might even vaguely compare it to the exaggerated sinch between a woman's rib cage and hip bones, just without the flare of femininity. The sight of narrow hips snaps him out of his comparison a bit, but doesn't deter him from staring.

Freckles adorn the apexs of both shoulders, sparsely scattered along the line of his spine. They remind him of constellations. He notes that Dream has dimples at the crux of his tailbone.

George's saliva goes down thick as syrup.
The fool, he has to remind himself.
And there's something else, but his eyes have yet to fully adjust to the light in the room. Parts of the man's skin are still swamped in blurry darkness.
But his keen ability to note the small aspects of Dream comes in handy, when George catches the sight of <i>lines</i> along the ridges of his shoulder blades.
At first, he thinks they're slight imprints of clothing wrinkles, or a trick of the light.
But fate has a way to taunt him at every turn, it seems. Because Dream shuffles, just slightly; the perfect amount of luminescence falling upon his skin.
Scratch marks.
A <i>lot</i> of them.
Obscene, abhorrent thoughts paint a vivid image of exactly <i>how</i> he got them, and George detests himself for it.
He hastily shuts his eyes and turns to face the wall. He doesn't care how loud he is.
Footsteps start up again. They move towards George's side of the room, and vague panic floods fear through his veins.
Soles pause beside his bed.
The dull golden light behind George's lids is snuffed out when Dream turns the lamp off. And he lingers. George knows the hesitation in his steps, when he eventually makes his way back towards

his own side.
He feels bile again; another strong wave of confusing nausea rising in the pit of his stomach. The vague sound of Dream climbing into bed echoes in the newfound vacancy of his brain.
But, for once, he can't pay attention to that. Because there's a storm brewing in his gut; images of acrylic nails digging trenches into unmarked skin filling the emptiness of his mind. Flashes of nail polish and pristine nail beds embellishing Dream's shoulder blades and waist with rakes of pleasurable red lines is enough to make his breathing speed up. He wonders absently if it was the girl who sat three rows down from him in chemistry.
His mind supplies him with the vision of her fake nails against hazel freckles.
God, he feels insane. Deplorable.
He mashes his reddened cheek into his pillow, squeezing his eyes to forcefully dispel his irrationality.
And George eventually falls asleep with uncertainty and bewilderment cradled in his palms.
He dreams of nothing.

Carmine and Acoustic

Chapter Summary

How something can sound so beautiful yet dangerous, George isn't sure.

Because Dream's music is peril incarnate.

It's the touch of a lover's hand, yet the sinking of claws into skin. It's the oxygen he breathes to live, yet the carbon monoxide corrupting his cells.

It's hazardous. It's heavenly.

Dream plays his guitar for George.

Chapter Notes

Hi hi! And welcome back to Dud Cigarettes!

I am super, *super* excited to share this chapter! I'm very proud of it, and I think a lot of you will be happy with the clothing choices for Dream..;)

This is a slow-burn: just a gentle reminder.

But! I hope you enjoy where I take their characterization, and I *really* enjoy their interactions and dialogue here.

ALSO! There's a song I use in this that you can listen to in the beginning if you want to follow along with the lyrics where they're incorporated. The song is 'Is Everybody Going Crazy?' by Nothing But Thieves! Highly recommend!!

As always, if Dream and/or George ever say they're no longer comfy with nsfw/shipping, this fic will be immediately taken down.

"Do you mind if I play for a bit?"

The sentence is hushed, melting easily with the low whistle of wind through the split and frayed gaps in the window screen. It's the first thing that's been uttered in well over an hour- the only sounds thus far being the scratch of pen on paper and the rustle of glossed textbook pages.

So, despite it's gentle delivery, the sound of Dream's honeyed voice still startles George, but only slightly. Because it seems his ears are chained to Dream at all times- addicted to the pull of his soul and trained to constantly seek his presence without permission.

Even if George doesn't realize it, he's been listening, observing, *appreciating*. All in complete silence.

His brain has been noting every crack of Dream's knuckles when they get stiff from hovering above his keyboard, every yawn he tries to stifle from staring at the glare of his screen for too long. He's been filing away each twirl of every ring, every stretch of strained muscles, every gentle hum of unknown tunes.

And he knows Dream is wearing a different type of tongue piercing today. It's embarrassing how he can *tell*, just by the sound it emits against perfectly-aligned teeth when he speaks.

So, so embarrassing.

But only for him- for *George*. Because no one else knows about this. Knows about how attuned he is to Dream, whether the blond is aware of it or not. The problem is that *George* knows, and that simple notion raises numerous red flags. So many, in fact, that whenever Dream is in focus, the world goes blurry with carmine fog, thick enough to choke on.

Red is a color that's been following him- haunting him.

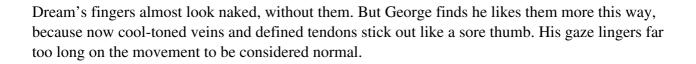
And he's fucking colorblind.

But it's there. It's *definitely* there. In the print of his shoes as he walks across pavement, leaving a trail of unrequited desire in their wake. On the roof of his mouth when it opens to say Dream's name, crimson stained lips aching to release the flood of red lodged in his throat. It's embedded beneath his nails when visions of painted acrylics against tanned skin morph into his own, blunt fingertips.

Guilt is a heavy burden.

It grips his heart with an iron fist, and leaves George feeling *terrified*. Because *why* does he feel guilty? *Why* does he feel remorse building in his chest with each glance tossed to the man across

the room?
George doesn't know. And that's just his problem, isn't it?
"George."
God.
He loves how Dream says his name. There's an affectionate lilt to his inflection that George likes to think he reserves only for him. But he knows that's not true. It's just how Dream speaks, like each word is a lover and their letters are his vocal adoration. How his lips caress each vowel that leaves their plateau, overbrimming with addictive sugar and subtle grit.
George's feelings are confusing.
They're a maze, and he doesn't have a map. The only clue is a carbonated bottle of obsession, ready to burst at the seams, and the fervent taste of starvation. Hunger for something <i>so close</i> he can almost swallow it whole and quell the desire bubbling under his skin, yet unreachable- taunting him beyond vast walls and corridors he doesn't yet know how to traverse.
This feeling is not new.
But what <i>is</i> new is the sight of Dream, sitting on his bed, leaning against the wall, holding an item he's never seen before. George's breathing turns labored, and he nearly chokes at the sight of an abandoned, ebony case, lying ajar on the floor.
In palms George knows are supple and soft, lay a polished, acoustic guitar.
George can tell it's red, because of course it is.
Deft, large hands fumble with the knobs at the crest of the neck, adjusting a few chords absentmindedly. There's a yellow pick abandoned on the nightstand, alongside a cluster of silver rings.



George should speak before he loses his mind altogether.

"Sorry, what?" he asks. The pen he's been holding slips a little between slick fingers. He doesn't know when his hands got so sweaty.

Dream's mouth tilts up in a smirk, still focused on tuning the neglected instrument. "I asked," he starts with a drawl, "if you'd be okay with me playing for a bit, princess."

George's mouth goes dry. "Your guitar?"

He knows it was a stupid question, based on the bewildered look he's sent. It's merely a brief, fleeting glance, but it's enough to pin George in place on his comforter.

"No, my *trombone*," Dream quips with a roll to his eyes. "Yes, my guitar. I just wanted to make sure it was fine. I know you're studying, and stuff."

"I'm not," George says, a little too quickly. He winces, and backtracks a bit. "I mean, I was, I just haven't really been paying attention."

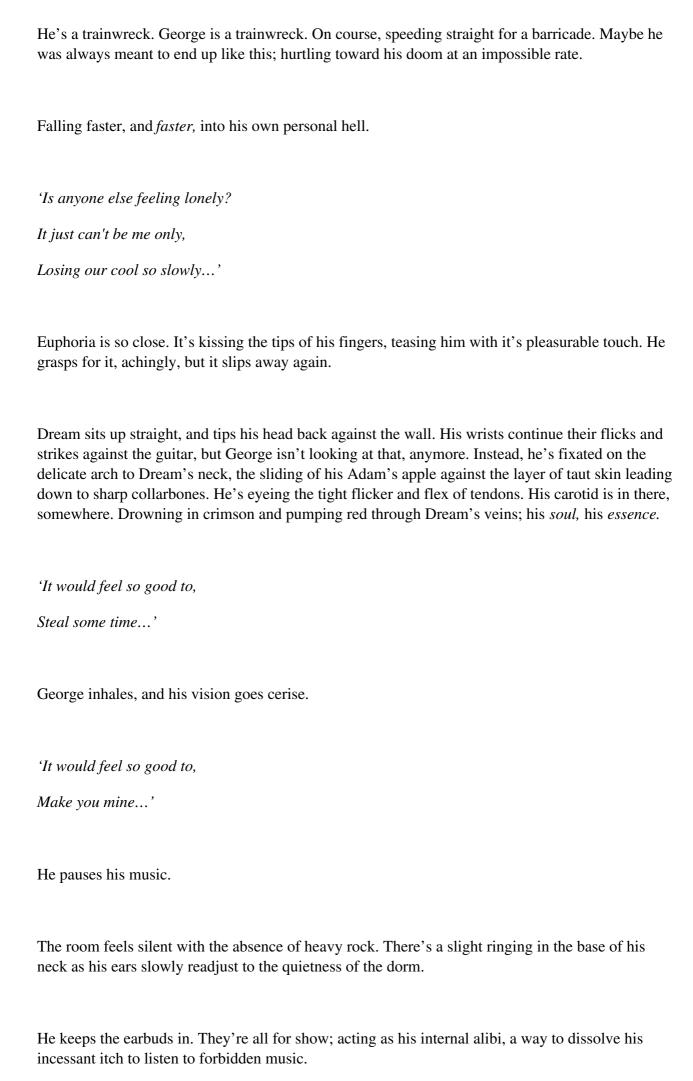
"Clearly."

Dream is looking at him with amusement in his eyes.

And George pretends to act unbothered, shrugging his shoulders and shoving his earbuds back in place. He spams the volume button, because maybe if his music is loud enough, it'll prevent him from slipping further into a pool of red. Prevent him from watching soft, *soft* fingertips dance across corded strings, prevent him from listening to jasmine-laden hums and rattles of gruff vocal cords.

There's something so *intimate* about listening to someone's music. And George doesn't think he can bear it, not when it's Dream. But before he can return what little focus he possesses to the messy, nearly-barren notebook pages on his lap, there's sharp movement from across the room. Dream's raising his arms, up, up, until his fingers can thread through oak strands. George recognizes the movement instantly. There's a hair tie caught between ivory teeth, head angled down to sweep half a crown of hair into a messy ponytail. Fringe falls in wisps to frame his face; *intentional*, almost, in the way they perfectly accent his high cheekbones and stark jawline. The gods must look out for him. They must seat him on a throne and polish him shining for the world to see. Their golden boy. Practiced hands tighten the hair tie in place, tugging on neat ends until he deems it satisfactory. His eyes dart up when he finishes, and George doesn't look away. There's something swimming, churning, in those green eyes of his, a brow thrown up in silent question. Another coy smirk paints his lips. Nothing But Thieves blares in his ears. Heavy guitar and drums meant to distract him only end up making their held eye contact that much more poignant. George watches as Dream lowers his head to eye the neck of his guitar. Fingers strum once, twice, across the strings. He adjusts, tunes, and nitpicks. George is deaf to it all. He's divided his attention between the blank paper in his lap and the personified addiction across the room. Each time tanned digits, curved and delicate, carve their name into the chords, George forces

himself to look away.
With each strum, he's left to imagine what sort of notes and melodies are being sung into the air, what sort of soul is being poured into audible creation, what Dream can say without using words.
George swallows, and <i>listens</i> .
He can only hear his music's lyrics. They're annoyingly prevalent in his mind- loud enough to completely drown out his overwhelming urge to drink in the acoustic vibrations from the oxygen in the air.
'I just wanna go blur the line,
And leave our afflictions behind'
There's more movement. Dream is hunched over his guitar now, eyes fluttered shut against ruddy cheeks and lips parting around words that fall upon deaf ears.
'The sky is coming down,
'The sky is coming down, I know it's strange,
•
I know it's strange,
I know it's strange, But heaven's a mindset away' George feels as if he's floating, observing Dream. Like he's drifted from the shell of this room into a cloud-lined haven- thick with allure and intrigue. Dream melts into his focus, a veil of serenity falling over his expression. It softens the corners of his eyes, swells his cheeks, and creates a
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There's poison in the air, and all George wants to do is taste it.

By the time the first few chords reach the grasp of his ears, George is practically *leaning* towards Dream, like he's a magnet, drawing him in with an invisible pull.

Waves lap at the shore of George's mind when soft melodies tangle around the fragile exterior of his heart; they slip between the slats of his ribs and seep toxins into his bloodstream. If he listens hard enough, he can almost pick up on the drip of rainfall on pavement, the sizzle of a cigarette against ash, the brush of leaves on leaves during cloudburst.

How something can sound so beautiful yet dangerous, George isn't sure.

Because Dream's music is peril incarnate.

It's the touch of a lover's hand, yet the sinking of claws into skin. It's the oxygen he breathes to live, yet the carbon monoxide corrupting his cells.

It's hazardous. It's heavenly.

Dream is humming, too. Vocal chords striking vibrations against each other to create sin itself-infecting George from the inside out, resonating through his limbs long after the sound ceases to exist. And George doesn't know when he started staring, again. But he is, and he can't look away.

There's a furrow to Dream's brows that wasn't there before. It forms a tight crease between themnormally-smooth skin pulled taut to reflect some sort of emotion George doesn't understand.

The song sounds sad. Enchanting and bewitchingly deceptive. Gentle hands pour coldness into each music note, just barely-there.

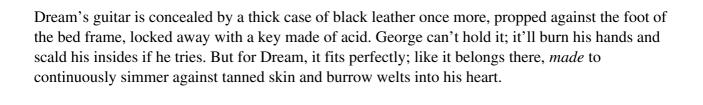
At the same time a particularly loud chord is strummed, Dream's neck falls lax, and it lolls to the side. Oakwood eyelashes flutter open, and their gazes lock.

The last vibration lingers; finality in the way it's delivered, yet refusing to die all at once. Somehow, George thinks the last note will never leave him. And now, the room is shockingly still. The breeze has ceased, as have the chirps of finches outside their window. George doesn't even think his heart is beating anymore. Dream has whispered treacherous poison through his soul. His heart doesn't feel like his own anymore, with its heavy presence in his veins. George is sure he looks crazy right now. Staring wide-eyed, lips parted as he attempts to snatch his breathing back from newfound clean air. Dream looks like he's waiting for something, when he eventually leans forward to rest his forearms on the smooth side-paneling of the guitar. He lays his head down on top of them, and smiles a bit. His eyes close again. He looks almost like he could fall asleep. More hair escapes the clutches of his hair tie- the gods blessing him once more with perfectly-placed cascading, honeyed locks. George finds himself speaking without permission. He's been doing that a lot lately. "You're good at that." His voice sounds like it's been through hell and emerged broken beyond repair. Maybe it has. And then he remembers that he still has his earbuds in. A pit forms a sinkhole in his stomach. But he knows it's too late; Dream will know he's been listening either way. He just will. Peaceful eyes crack open again, finding shattered umber ones with ease.

"I'm good at a lot of things, Georgie," he murmurs, absentmindedly drumming his fingers against the hollow, scarlet wood of his guitar. His cheek mashes against his arm as he buries his face more firmly into the comfort of warm skin.

Dream is arrogant; annoyingly confident and good at every little thing. But maybe he has a right to be, with how infatuated everyone seems to be with him. George is no exception to this, of course. He inhales sharply, and tears his eyes away from Dream.
Biting his lip, George lightheartedly tosses back, "Like what?"
It can be perceived as a tease. As a playful remark; meant to evoke brief laughter and vanish from memories as quick as it came. But there's an open-endedness to the question that George purposefully leaves, silently praying for Dream to take it.
He wants to learn. Wants to <i>listen</i> . Wants to <i>understand</i> the man behind his obsession.
There's a few beats of silence, and Dream looks like he's mulling his answer over. A brief flash of uncertainty flickers across his expression, but George blinks, and it's gone.
Maybe he'd imagined it.
Dream looks smug again, and another smirk breaks out across his lips.
"Wouldn't you like to know," he says, eventually.
Yes.
George's thoughts are <i>loud</i> .
I want to know everything there is to know. I want to see through you. I want to map you out. I don't know why, but I want you to break and split for me. I don't know anything, so teach me. Tell me.
But instead, he says nothing.

George finds enough energy in himself to roll his eyes.



It looks painful, holding that much power.

It makes George wonder when it'll be that he can hear Dream's music again. And it makes him even *more* confused. He hates it.

Wetting his lips and leaning back, George allows himself to slip, just a little, into the churning sea of red nipping at his toes.

"Why haven't you played your guitar before?"

Dream is turned away from him, shoving a folder into the worn backpack against his nightstand. There's a minute tensing of his limbs, pausing.

Click, click, click.

George has learned relatively fast that Dream can't keep still. The clink of his jewelry against his teeth is a habit of his; whether it's out of nervousness or impatience, George doesn't know. Just like he doesn't know anything else, it seems.

One last strike of metal against enamel, and Dream is straightening with his backpack in hand. The strap is thrown around his shoulder, and, curiously, his gaze turns to the floor.

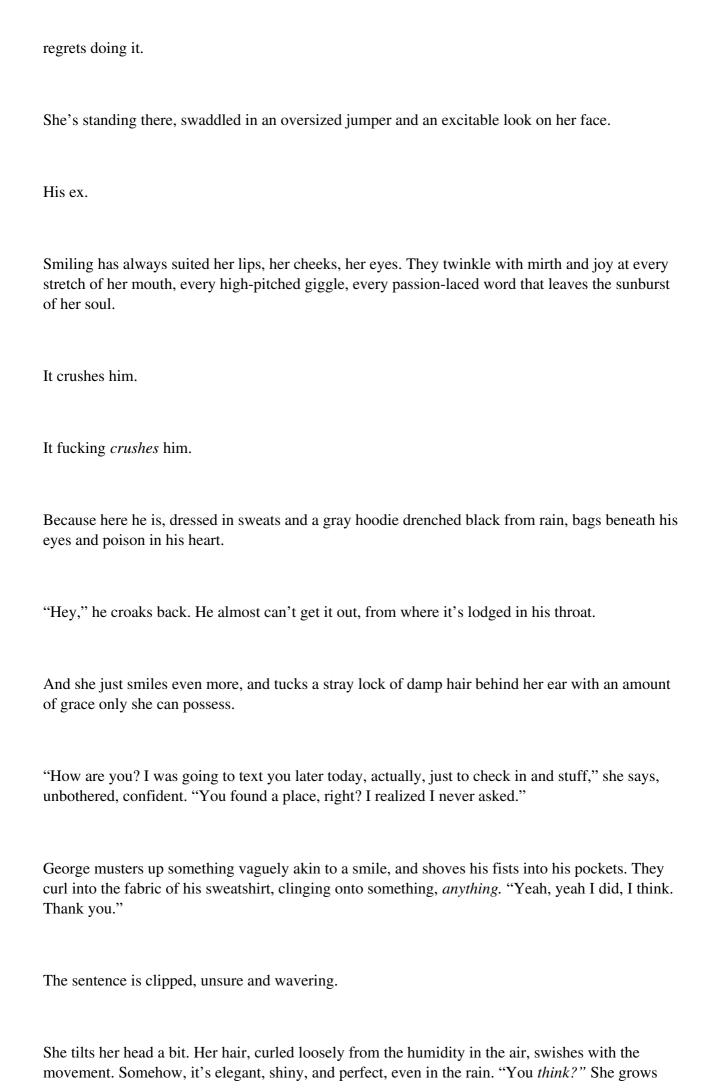
It's unlike him.

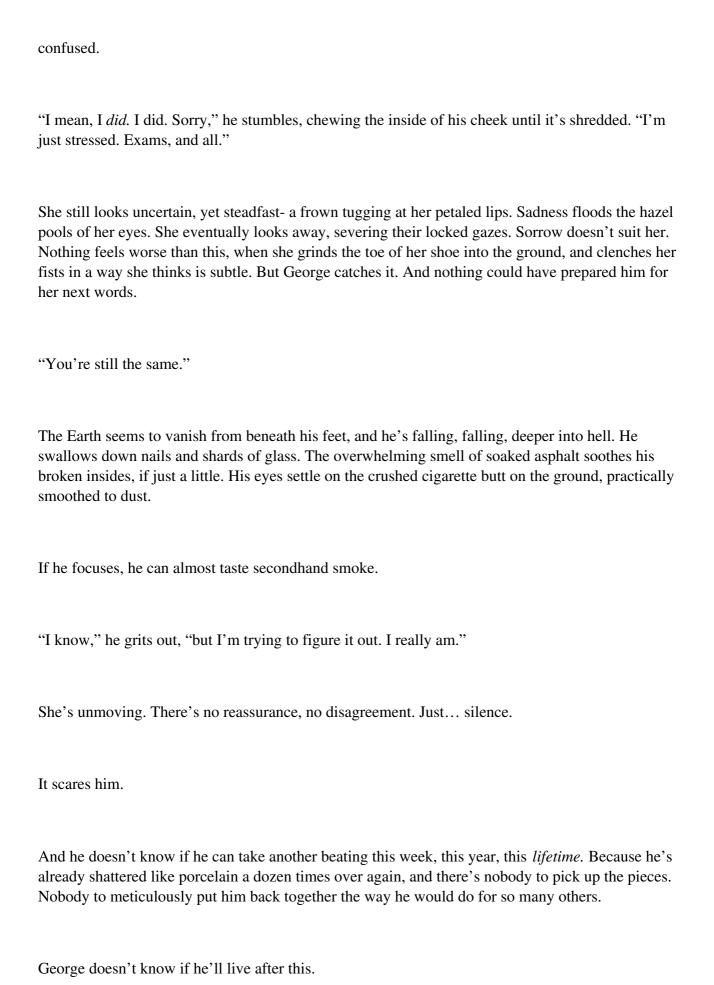
"I only play it when I have a reason to," Dream says with a slight smile- smooth, yet boiling as freshly-brewed tea. Some drops hit George's bare skin, burning through tissue and eating him alive. He sees red again, and tastes smoke.

Dream is out the door to class without another utterance.
And George tries to tend to the wounds he'd afflicted, but nothing seems to heal the poison embedded into his bloodstream, or the charred wounds on his skin from where Dream's words had seared their name, or the ailment tangled in knots around his heart.
So, he stumbles around with an injured soul for the rest of the day.
He doesn't understand Dream. But that's not new.
It's Friday, and George is thinking.
Probably not a good idea, when he's walking on wet asphalt. Today it's raining, and George has his hood pulled up over his ears; an attempt to fend off the torrent overhead.
Larger droplets <i>plop</i> on his head as he passes beneath a tree. Around him, students scatter, seeking shelter and warm beds. But George is walking slow, today. He's padding through puddles and allowing humidity to fill his lungs. He gives the Earth time to smell of damp soil and slick pavement, because it reminds him of the man he's supposed to be avoiding.
And he <i>has</i> been doing that for a week now.
They've maybe said a handful of words to each other, mostly in passing, and mostly from Dream's end. The blond seems to be trying harder for conversation nowadays, and the reason eludes George, as always.
He gets up before Dream in the morning, and falls asleep while he's out in the evening.
George had come home on Wednesday night to a stale Asiago bagel and a sticky note on top:

'They gave me an extra Figured you'd be back soon so u can have it:)' He stared at the note for a long time. It was hard to ignore the taste of nightshade on his tongue or the deep frown to his lips. Because he glanced to his left, and Dream was asleep in his bed. It was only ten at night, that day, and George had avoided his dorm like the plague. The curiosity of why Dream was home so soon was drowned out by vague regret. He still feels guilty about it. It's not that big of a deal, and George knows it. But the mere thought of Dream scribbling a note for him in the morning, only to come back late with it still sitting untouched makes the red in his vision nearly blinding. A lone bead of rainfall caresses the curve of his cheek. It dips into the crease of his lips, and somehow seeps through onto his tongue. Something vaguely *Dream* kisses his tastebuds, when the droplet settles. A cigarette butt gets crushed by his shoe as he drags his feet forward. There's a person passing him, and George recognizes the gait, the shoes, and, oh god, the legs. Terror stiffens his limbs, and he puts his head down. Hastily, he shrugs his hood more firmly over his head and pleads for mercy. Mercy never *has* had him in its favor, has it? Because those shoes stop, then still for a moment, before swiveling on pavement and crunching drenched pebbles beneath their soles. George braces himself, but it does little to stop him from jolting at a light touch to his shoulder. "George?"

His breathing goes unsteady. Fear floods his veins when he turns around, and immediately, he





But then, mercy seems to change its mind. Because suddenly there's a hand on his shoulder, and a trapdoor opens deep in his stomach, plunging another bout of deadly sin through his limbs. The

Heavy, cool rings are there, even if he can't see them.
"George," the devil behind him says. George shudders, and wonders if he feels the action through his palm. "What are you <i>doing</i> out here?" Dream moves to his side, but George doesn't look up. He shuffles his feet, instead.
He opens his mouth, steeling himself to introduce his personified demons. Squeezing his eyes shut and praying for relief, he begins, "Dream, this is-"
But she cuts him off; not out of rudeness, but out of self-assured excitement. "Oh! You're Dream?"
Another trapdoor falls open from beneath his feet. She knows Dream. Of course she does.
"Yeah, that's me." He says it like how he says George's name. He feels somewhat ill. "I'm George's roommate. I was actually kind of looking for him. Sorry for interrupting."
She laughs, boisterous and ear-catching. She's starlight incarnate; bright and bubbly and lovely. The hand on George's shoulder tightens minutely, and he wonders why it's still there.
"Then don't mind me, at all. We were just catching up a bit. I <i>thought</i> I recognized you from English class, but I wasn't sure," she says, all smiles and cherry lips.
George allows himself to look up at Dream. He's smiling too, all glinting metal and deadly addiction. "Yeah, thought I recognized you, too. You okay if I steal him for a bit?"
Her hands fly up, waving dismissively in the air. "No, no, go ahead. I've got to get to class anyway, and I'm <i>soaked</i> , oh gosh," she exclaims as she brushes stray damp strands from her eyes. But, for a moment, she pauses, and her gaze flickers between him and Dream, intense and inquisitive. Knowing calmness floods her expression when realization overtakes her features.

Peace.

hand is soft and large. George can tell, even through two layers of clothing.

And George detests it. Because he doesn't fucking understand why.

"Nice catching up with you, Gogy. And it's lovely to finally meet you, Dream. I feel like everyone talks about you, but you leave class before I can properly introduce myself."

Dream shoots her a polite, knowing look, and nods. "I get that a lot. Nice to meet you, too."

She offers a smile, a laugh, and a wave, before turning heel and walking away from them.

Once she's gone, George feels like a shell of a man. He feels sick; shaky and anxiety-ridden, heart hammering against his ribcage and hands slick with sweat. The palm on his shoulder slides down to splay at the middle of his back. He doesn't know if it makes things better or worse.

But then, Dream *snorts*. It's a choked laugh, so unlike his usual low chuckles and light wheezes. George looks at him, speechless, and he looks back.

"Gogy?"

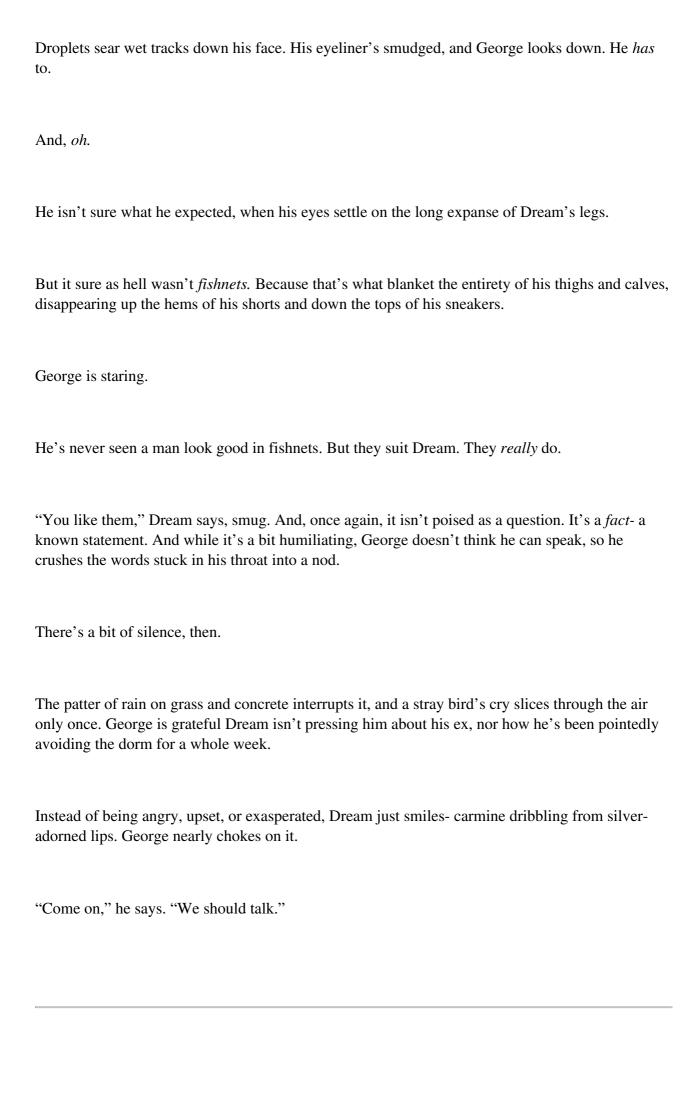
The nickname threatens to bring back rose-tinted memories; threatens to flood his vision and leave an aching bitterness on his tongue. As if washing the feeling away, he swallows. Defeated and exhausted, George just shakes his head and sighs.

"She'd call me that, sometimes. I don't even know where it came from."

Dream's still laughing, but he moves to stand in front of George, rather to his side. The warmth of his hand leaves it's spot. Coolness floods the area, and George feels even more empty.

It's then that he registers Dream's clothing.

Despite the pouring rain, he's dressed in black jean shorts and a baggy sweater, tucked into a cinched waist and sleeves rolled up to his wrists. There's nothing to stop the rain from flattening his hair, so it hangs loose and wet in his face, slightly wavy as it sweeps along the nape of his neck.



Dream takes him to a coffee shop.

It's a relatively small establishment, nestled between two larger buildings and a few trees. It's more run-down than the surroundings, with characteristic crumbling concrete walls and ivy vines snaked up its sides. But Dream lacks any hesitation as he opens the door to let George in first.

The exterior does little justice to its homeyness and welcoming atmosphere. It's warmly-lit- oak planks lining the walls and fashionable booths scattered along the edges. A chimney sits unused at the far end, awaiting colder months to approach.

The menu is eye-catchingly scrawled on a colorful chalkboard above their heads. There's the loud whirr of an espresso machine, and George lets the smell of coffee beans and wood fill his lungs and simmer there. He feels calmer, already.

It's not until they sit in a booth butted against a fogged glass window that he realizes.

"Dream," he starts. The man spares him a glance. "I thought you hated coffee?"

And maybe this question reveals just how closely George pays attention to everything *Dream*, because he's deduced this preference completely out of silent observation. A small wash of color floods his cheeks. He's afraid he's given himself away, if he hasn't done so already, just out of how often he *stares*.

But, when he looks up, he's surprised to find *Dream* looking to the side, a flicker of flushed embarrassment passing through forest-green eyes. It's brief, but there.

"I know. I do, but," he pauses, blinks, and snatches his lip ring between his teeth, tugging slightly, "I know *you* like it. And I've been here a few times, so I figured it'd be a good place to stop by." George's brows draw together, because he's never *once* told Dream about his love for coffee. Some strange sort of mix between relief and hope coils in his gut. Dream seems to catch on to his perplexion fast.

"What, you thought I wouldn't notice? George, you come home with near-empty iced coffees *everyday*. It was pretty easy to see you liked it."

He says this as if it's obvious. So blunt and factual that it convinces George into believing it is just

that. *Obvious*. Everything about his character is painfully, *blaringly*, obvious. He's not special; not someone to fawn over and appreciate the littler details of.

The fool, the fool, the fool.

George picks at the scuffed wood of the table. He purses his lips, and refuses to meet Dream's eyes. "Yeah, it was pretty obvious. You're right."

They don't say much, despite the fact Dream dragged him here under the pretense to converse. Instead, George sips on a double-shot vanilla latte, and Dream fidgets with his rings, a glass of iced tea to his right. The condensation on the surface drips onto the glossed table in sync with the rain on the window.

It's jasmine tea- his favorite. Somehow, George already assumed this.

The waiter comes around, eventually, and Dream starts clicking his tongue piercing again. It hadn't happened much tonight, which is a rare feat. He rests his chin in his palm, looking up through black-smudged lashes at the waiter, offering a smile and a request for a slice of coffee cake. The man seems to linger a bit before returning to his station. Dream looks smug, but that's hardly unusual.

It's when George starts to think the downpour may finally ease up that Dream finally speaks.

"Do you like the rain, George?"

And he blinks a few times at that. Stares at where Dream is facing the window- sharp, defined profile illuminated by the dreary light filtering through slick glass. It catches on his lip ring, and George decides his jewelry *definitely* looks better in natural lighting.

"Yeah, I do," he replies. He doesn't.

But he knows Dream does. Because he stays inside on the days it rains; chipping away at calculus and English with one eye trained on the swirling gray and rattling brush outside.



The statement brews in George's mind. He turns it over, and over, until it's dissolved into questions that can't quite form.

"George," he murmurs, "you don't know me. That's what I'm trying to get at, here."

The waiter passes by, and sets a plate of coffee cake on the edge of the table. Dream snaps his eyes up. There's something swimming in them that makes George feel like a starving man, and, strangely, he wishes- *aches*- that Dream would lay those eyes on him; ones holding that same sweltering emotion.

"I know," George responds with difficulty.

Dream stares at the waiter as he retreats. He doesn't bother looking back in George's direction when he speaks again, soft and tired-sounding.

"Do you?" Dream is frowning. It's off-putting on his normally carefree face.

George doesn't know what to say, so Dream speaks again.

"You should tell me about her."

Doe eyes go wide with alarm, anxiety stutters the beat of his heart, and sand coats his tongue. His breathing picks up. "What?"

Leaning back in his seat, Dream fixes George with an unreadable expression. "I'm a curious guy. And..." he pauses, resolve straightening his features, "I think I'll understand you more if you tell me what happened."

George *wants* to feel conflicted. He *wants* to feel frustration bubble up his throat at the fact that Dream's trying to pry. But George is a weak, *weak* man. And he's desperate to just *spill his soul* out to someone; *anyone*, who may be willing to pick up his shattered pieces, no matter how slim the chance.

When he's silent for a few more moments, Dream continues with a sigh. It sounds exasperated. "Okay, *fine*, then." His eyes flutter shut against his cheeks. "I'm allergic to *Tide* detergent, I have ADHD, and I've never dated anyone," Dream states, punctual and sturdy. That last one sticks like glue against George's rib cage. "Now you know more about me, princess. Tell me about her, will you?"

It's nearly suffocating, just how thickly Dream lays the question on him. But his mind is *racing* away from him, turning heel and kicking dust up in its haste to flee anywhere but where he wants it

Dream's never dated anyone. He's never dated anyone. Dream. Dream's never-

"There's not much to tell," George shakily replies before he can think twice about it.

"You're lying, George."

A few nervous, rattling laughs escape the clutches of George's throat. "Well, you're kind of putting me on the spot, *Dream*."

A pink tongue juts out between ivory teeth, glinting metal piercing catching between the gaps. Smiling with blindingly-red lips, Dream eases up a bit. "You're right, I know. But to be fair," he leans back, and George nearly chokes when a fishnet-clad leg hoists up to tuck towards his chest, "I'm kind of sick of pussyfooting around you. We've been living together for, like, a month, and I've only been able to discern *one* thing about you."

It's George's turn to quirk an eyebrow up. "And what is that?"

Click, click, click.

"I won't tell. Because I don't even think you know it, either."

If his reality had the ability to get even more confusing, George thinks this is the peak. It *must* be. Because even a fucking *stranger* knows more about him than he does. His mood depletes a bit, and he feels *drained*, all of a sudden.

He decides he doesn't really care anymore. With a rattling breath, George stares out the window; stares at mist on pavement and trickling droplets down leaves. Stares at his distorted reflection, looking tiredly back. He can't even recognize the face he sees, anymore.

"She was the best person I've ever had in my life, I think," he starts. Mimicking Dream, he brings a leg to his chest, and rests a cheek against a damp knee. He feels like his clothes will never dry after tonight. "I loved her, for a while. I don't know. We met right after highschool and she was just always so... *herself*."

The sky splits open again, and another burst of thundering rain hammers against the window. The world goes a bit darker. George's reflection grows clearer.

"Like, she never really cared what people thought about her, and she had *so* many plans," he continues. A frown crosses his lips. "And so did I, back then. But her plans were a bit more stable than mine, so I applied here, instead of the west coast, where I thought I wanted to go. We both took a gap year and got accepted, obviously."

Almost, just *almost*, a rosey smile threatens to break out over his face, when he recalls her sunny voice crackling through the phone, cheering and crinkling her acceptance letter right into the mic, just so George knew it was there. But his face falls, when he remembers that he'd gotten his letter two weeks before hers. He never said anything about it-letting the paper rot away on his table day after day. Because he would go wherever she went, and if the letter never arrived at her doorstep, he could just say he didn't get one, either.

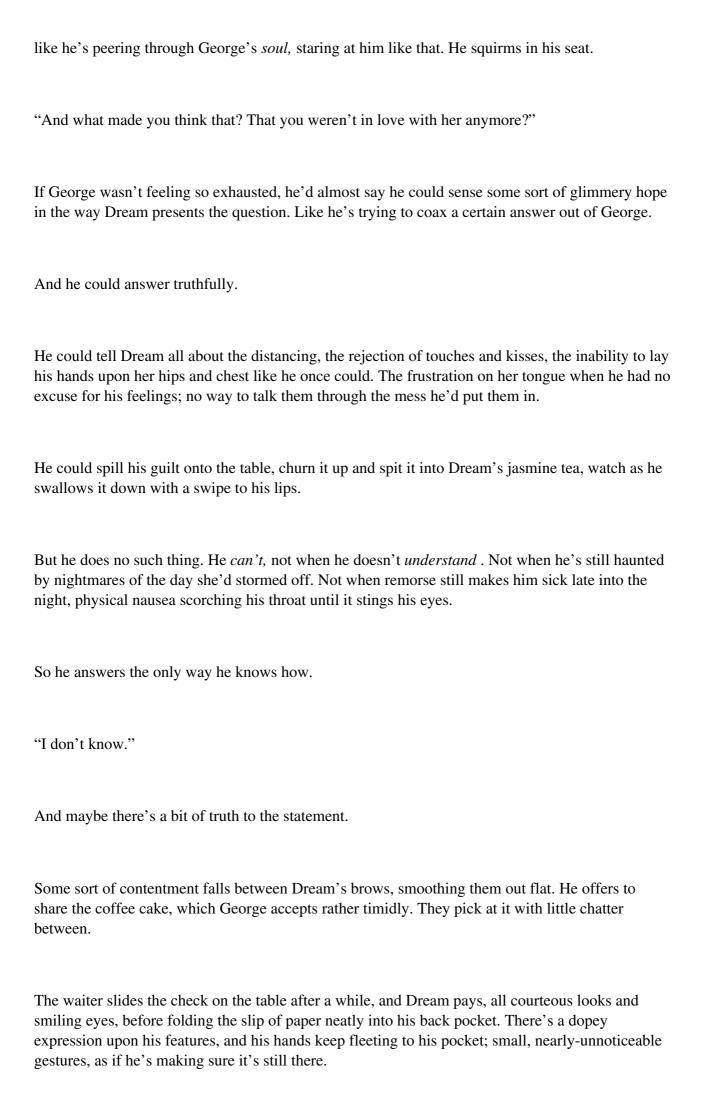
And, back then, he thought it was because of love. Thought it was because he couldn't bear to be without her, by her side, everyday.

But now, he knows that it was because she offered confidence; *stability*. Something that he could hold onto and follow blindly.

A constant in his confusing, dead-end life.

"So we went to school together and had a pretty good few years. At least, I think we did," George murmurs, pursing his lips to keep himself from untying the knots he'd secured around his heart long ago. "But, over the summer... I realized I wasn't in love with her anymore."

Dream's been silent through this, but an inquisitive glare catches in the pupil of his eye at this. It's



But, George tries not to analyze it. He really, <i>really</i> tries.
Instead, he sips at his now-cold coffee, and Dream nurses his dwindling tea. They wait out the storm until it dies altogether. And when it does, George is seeing red again.
Because Dream makes him see color.
And George doesn't know if that's a good thing, yet.
Life and reality is failing him.
He tries to hold it in his palms, but, like disintegrating grains of sand, it slips through the slots of his knuckles and is swept away by the passage of time.
So, George turns his attention to studying. He pours himself into his work; day and night, slaving away at nearly-indecipherable excerpts and statistics problems. There's a pad and pencil in his backpack wherever he goes on campus.
He doesn't listen to music anymore.
There's this sort of aching fear in his chest that tells him he'll end up connecting and comparing every song to Dream's; to melodic guitar strums and buttery hums. It's enough for him to toss his earbuds in his side drawer, collecting more and more dust day after day.
Dream's started bringing him vanilla lattes alongside his asiago bagels every now and then. It's a kind gesture, but neither of them note the change.

This was how he woke up this morning: a steaming coffee and bagel on his nightstand, Dream

sitting against his bed headboard with a laptop perched on crossed knees. George's chest felt like it was melting at the sight, tongue heavy like soaked cotton in his mouth and a flutter to his pulse.

It had made him feel inexplicably ill.

With bile at the back of his throat, George hastily shoved the bagel into his backpack and told Dream he'd be back late. *Very* late.

Because everytime he so much as *glanced* Dream's way, he felt like he was choking, *gasping*, on scarlet emotions. Dream had offered a nod and a dorky thumbs-up, and George was *gone*. He spent his day lingering in cafeterias and skirting the edge of a fountain, tip-toeing along the foot-trodden paths in a garden and studying in a multitude of places. He'd been to every library on campus, seen every residential building there is to see, and sat in every chair of his chemistry lecture hall (he pointedly avoided the third row from the back).

And he eventually finds himself back at the coffee shop, warmth seeping from the cracks in the foundation and beneath the door. He convinces himself it's because he has nowhere else to go, but that's not true.

Even the gods know it.

He seats himself where Dream had last, soaking up the rays of sunlight streaming from the window panes. The waiter who had served them a few days prior isn't working today. Instead, a polite older woman comes around with a smile and a drawl to her words. And he must be going crazy. *Has* to be. Because George swears he orders a coffee, or maybe an apple cider, but when she returns, there's suddenly a jasmine tea set in front of him.

He's never been a particularly big fan, but he leisurely sips on it anyway. Why he does it eludes him.

By the time the clock rolls into nine p.m., George has run out of places to be and things to do. It brings a grimace to his face, when he ultimately decides it'd be best to bite the bullet and head back. There are stones in his soles and barbells upon his shoulders, dragging his feet begrudgingly in the direction of his residence hall.

Idly, George wonders what Dream did today. He wonders if he's out right now, like he usually is during this time of night. Wonders if there's a new body keeping him warm in some unfamiliar bed

across campus. Wonders if he brings that body a latte and a bagel every other day, wonders if he whispers carmine sin into their ears with guitar serenades, wonders if he takes them out to new cafes because he knows they enjoy the taste of coffee.

In his mind, George can almost convince himself that he's special. That Dream treats him differently; treats him *better* than these substitutes of human companionship he seeks each night.

But, as his feet eventually round the corner to his dorm room, he thinks he must be sorely mistaken.

Because there he is. The man of his daydreams, his nightmares, his conflicting morality. His back is towards him, but George knows it's Dream. He'd recognize any angle of this man, as embarrassing as it is to admit. Draped over his shoulders is a cropped tee, thin and fraying. His midriff is bared to George's eyes, and he can't find it in himself to look away. Can't tear his gaze from rippling lumbar muscles and dimples stamped just above the hem of peeking briefs. Sweats hang low on his hips, just barely clinging to the subtle swell of muscle and fat on his upper thighs.

And maybe George is distracting himself by taking in his attire and appreciating tanned, exposed skin. Maybe he's trying to stall.

No, he *definitely* is. Trying to stall the ache in his chest, the tar pit expanding in his stomach, the nauseating confusion building in his throat.

Because Dream isn't alone.

There are arms hooked around his neck and shoulders, clinging dainty fingers into thin fabric and riding his crop-top further upwards. There's a smaller leg between Dream's thighs, and his hands are gripping into a small waist, pressing fingerprint-sized divots and ring-indents into soft skin. He's got her pressed against the wall adjacent to their door, and George feels like his limbs have solidified into cement.

It's as if he's rooted in place, eyes wide as planets and a paleness searing across his cheeks.

Listening to soft moans and slick-kissed sounds makes George's insides turn into hell itself. He doesn't know what to do, so he just turns around. He'll sleep at the library, or his friend's dorm, or *fuck*, maybe just the garden out back.

Anywhere but here. He can't fucking *stand it*, and the worst part, is he doesn't understand *why*.

But he refuses to address the perplexing storm of emotions in his chest. Instead, he forces his mind to go blank; for numbness to sweep through his limbs and an echo to reverberate in his skull. He makes his footsteps light as feathers, guiding them in the direction of the stairwell.

It's one thing for George to *imagine*. For him to craft his own image of Dream's rendez-vous in the evenings, for him to blur the bodies and faces that keep his roommate company on nights like these.

But, it's entirely different when it's real. Tangible. Visible.

These aren't specially-crafted images anymore. They're *reality*. And reality is still failing him, *horribly*.

Salvation seems so close, when the exit sign paints his skin a luminous scarlet. Toes round the corner. The rest of his body is about to follow suit. So close, *so close*.

"George?"

Fate breathes down his neck.

Ice freezes over the numbness in his veins. Horror, *thunderous fear*, grips his bones and makes his stride die in the carpet beneath his heels.

Whitened knuckles claw into the strap of his backpack, when George's clumsy feet *somehow* manage to turn him around. He tries to blink slower, as if it'll somehow prolong the time it takes him to see what awaits his gaze.

But, eventually, his vision unblurs, and everything he's been dreading clogs his senses.

Dream is standing there, disheveled, wide-eyed, and slightly out of breath. Oak strands messily splay in every direction, and George does his best to not think about the hands that made them this way. Subtle scratch marks and bursted capillaries decorate the column of his throat. George hates

And his lips. <i>God</i> , his lips are bright red, kiss-bitten and slick with spit that's not his own.
But when George's eyes meet startled green ones, everything else fades into the background. Because Dream looks <i>panicked</i> , and George has never seen him lose his composure like this. It's so <i>unlike</i> him, so <i>foreign</i> , when Dream's pupils flood with anxiety and blatant worry.
George swallows down bitterness (envy, anger, <i>disgust?</i>), clearing the sand from his throat. "Hey,' he grits out. "Sorry, I was just leaving. Sorry."
He's apologizing. Why is he apologizing?
And Dream seems to think the same, with the way he throws his hands in the air and waves dismissively, shaking his head. "No, no, it's my fault. Thought you said you'd be back really late. Guess I overestimated." He tacks on a nervous chuckle. George doesn't reciprocate.
It's awkward. It's fucking <i>awkward</i> , and George's skin is crawling. And where Dream usually slices the tension with easygoing jokes and a carefree smile, he lacks in presence. Instead, his mouth is glued shut, metal jewelry idle and silent.
It's suffocating.
"Dream?"
A meek voice snaps George from his staring a bit. It's then that he remembers the other soul in the hall, the one who had been behind mussed up golden hair and had made a mess of tanned skin and hazel freckles. It makes the bitterness lingering on his tongue multiply in intensity.
A figure emerges behind Dream.
Curiosity is a <i>disease</i> . An ailment. One that seeps into his joints and bloodstream; urging his eyes to take in the limbs, face, hands, nails, and palms that had touched Dream in a way he'd only imagined.

to admit that they look good on him.

And the first thing that George notices... is that she's not a *she* at all.

A smaller, thin man fiddles with the skin between his knuckles, clad in casual clothes and lingering by Dream's side. George is looking around. He's investigating the hall behind Dream, searching for hidden exits he might've not known about. But nowhere does the girl exist. The one he thought he'd seen pinned against a wall just minutes prior. Pinned beneath ring-enhanced fingers and large palms.

She's vanished.

But what still permeates is the blistering blush across the man's cheeks, the plump irritation of kissed lips, and the way his thin fingers perfectly match the ones he'd seen gripping the collar of Dream's cropped tee.

The carpet is pulled out from beneath him when he *realizes*.

It's the fucking waiter.

The waiter from a few days ago, from when Dream had bought George his first vanilla latte and admitted he'd never dated anyone. From when they'd spent an afternoon in soaked clothes and slowly-spilt secrets.

George feels like a fucking *idiot*. He feels like...

Fuck. He feels like the damned *fool*.

Nothing is clicking in his head. Because Dream likes *women*. He beds pretty girls, makes them remember him enough to whisper his name all over campus like a shared secret. He leaves his sweatshirts with them because he likes them, he *fucks* them, because *Dream likes girls*. He does. He *does*. George knows this. *He knows this*.

Doesn't he?

George can't move, can't *speak*, as he observes Dream turn towards the man, a polite, apologetic smile on his lips. They murmur a few hushed words to each other, exchange a fleeting kiss, and then the waiter is brushing past George, towards the exit. Enraptured giggles fly off his tongue and tumble into the tar pit in George's gut.

When he's gone, Dream is already unlocking their dorm. Like he's already forgotten about the man with infatuation swarming his insides, who's not even out of the building yet. Like he's throwing away the body he decided should keep him warm tonight.

George follows with tentativeness weighing down his steps. They're silent, once inside.

He feels irrationally angry, confused, *nauseous*. Throwing up was *not* on his agenda tonight, but it might just be, if his stomach keeps rolling like foaming white-capped waves during a hurricane. He doesn't think he's blinked once, since stepping inside. It's like his body's stopped functioning, because *Dream likes girls*. He likes girls. He likes waiters. He likes waiters with tiny waists and dark eyes and dainty fingers and-

"George," Dream's voice is startling in the overwhelming smog of screaming thoughts. And George whips his head up, desperate to latch onto something grounded in reality.

His is fucking failing him. Like always.

"Are you okay, George?" he asks. There's genuine concern in those eyes of his, brows drawn together and a frown to his lips. "Look, I'm sorry about all this, I really am. Didn't mean for you to see that."

After blinking back watery dryness from wide brown eyes, George scrambles to respond. "I didn't... I thought you liked girls."

Maybe he shouldn't have scrambled for *that*. Because George's face *ignites*, fiery embarrassment scorching the planes of pale cheeks. "I mean-" he goes to fix himself. But before he can, Dream is crossing the room.

There's a mission in his eyes; vague satisfaction and amusement sidled next to it. All worry and nervousness once held in them vanishes; quick as the brevity of a lightning strike. He halts right in front of George. The brow adorned with silver studs raises, curious and questioning.

"I do," Dream ensures.

It solves some hungry part of George's soul. It recomfirms at least *something* he'd thought factual of his roommate, and it leaves behind a small spark of dwindling confidence in George's system.

An aching breath, inhaling crimson smoke, and George continues, "But, I didn't know you- I didn't know that you..."

He can't do it. The words get stuck like burning honey behind his tongue. He feels pathetic.

Dream smiles, a bit. "What? That I like men, too?"

George just nods. It's all he feels capable of.

If Dream can get any closer, he does. Takes another step forward- so close George can almost see his reflection in the polished, silver surface of Dream's lip ring. If he were to inch forward, he's sure the reflection would disappear with the presence of his own heavy breaths. It would smother its surface in fogged-up moisture. A little bit of him, on *Dream*.

"You like girls, right, Georgie?" Dream says with a hum, hands shoved in his pockets.

George feels ridiculous for hesitating. It's hard to think straight, he rationalizes, when he can *feel* puffs of ash-laden breaths on his cheek.

He's taking a little too long to respond, and he sees something flicker behind steely emerald irises.

"Yes." George almost chokes on the syllable. For some reason, he feels *worse*, having gritted it out.

Amusement smothers Dream's lips and quirks them into a smile. "So do I. I like them *a lot*," he murmurs. A hand that George hadn't seen escape the confines of his sweats pocket rises into his vision. And this time, he's prepared for the feeling of *soft*, velvety fingertips on his jaw. They slide forward, halting at the apex of George's chin.

"But, y'know..." Dream continues, then trails off. Their gazes level with each other.

And George doesn't breathe. Because if he exhales, he knows something humiliating will rise up his throat alongside spent carbon dioxide.

The hand leaves its spot, and instead drifts towards a curl George didn't know had fallen across his forehead. Gentle fingers coax the strand of dark hair behind his ear. They leave burn marks in George's skin. He feels like he's melting.

Dream pulls his hand back, but doesn't move away. His next words float in wisps through the air, murmured light, airy, and *dreamlike*.

And they never leave George. They never will. They'll fester in his mind and eat him *alive*.

Because Dream's vermillion lips cradle hidden meanings, secrets, *nightmares*, when he leans in close, breath against George's ear and a grit to his voice, and says,

"I also like pretty boys."

Warmth and Poison

Chapter Summary

It's warm. Dream is warm. George's heart is cold.

Inexplicable sadness and loss and *disappointment;* it all drowns him. It nestles in his lungs and suffocates his airways. It infects his vision, his mouth, his veins.

The arm around his shoulder pulls him in, just slightly. A rattled exhale, and George is ready to split at the seams. So he does.

"What's wrong with me, Dream?"

Dream and George spend some time together.

Chapter Notes

Helllooo!!!!

Welcome back to Dud Cigarettes! This chapter is very long... haha. My outlines for these chapters always *seem* so concise, but then I start writing and I realize it's gonna be like 11k words lol.

A LOT of stuff happens this chapter. A few very poignant warnings before you begin:

Trigger warning for mild panic attacks, drinking, and smoking

Disclaimer: George's panic attack is modeled after my own experiences, and neither him nor Dream are experts on the matter in this. Please don't take this as a professional guide to deal with panic attacks.

This chapter also has some very sexual themes, but there is no explicit nsfw until later! Okay. Now that I got that out there... please enjoy:) I'm super excited to share this chapter with you! My twitter is linked in the endnotes. Follow me for updates and such!!

If Dream and/or George ever state they are no longer comfortable with shipping/nsfw, this fic will be immediately taken down.

George sees Dream differently, lately.

He's concluded that the irrational stirring of emotions in his chest everytime he so much as glances Dream's way are decidedly *not* negative. But they're definitely not positive, either. His inner turmoil lies in a gray zone; a limbo of sorts, lodged between helpless infatuation and persistent confusion.

There's newfound curiosity about the man George had already decided is a mystery. And that's shocking in itself, really. Because the fact that he has the capacity to gain even *more* interest in his roommate, is downright abhorrent.

It's impossible.

And yet, here George is, thinking about him. Sitting in his dorm, alone, with the A.C. unit obnoxiously whirring overhead. Playing with the webbed skin between his knuckles, imagining the phantom weight of metal catching on it, as if larger fingers are laced with his own.

He's still suffering from the aftershocks of his naïveté, ever since the night Dream had unveiled a *very significant* aspect of his life. The aspect of his life that includes men. Men who occasionally reside in his bed, his relationships, his *life*.

It had hit him harder than he'd like to admit.

A strong, nagging part of his brain has created a cesspool of self-deprecation; it's convinced him of his idiocy and ignorance, because *how could he have missed this? How did he not notice?*

Another portion is a cloudy haze, fuzzy and disorienting everytime his toes so much as *near* it. It fills his insides with a certain sort of dread; something so poignant and saturated it makes him feel ill. He feels it whenever Dream leaves at night, whenever he returns in the early a.m., whenever there's a latte occupying the edge of his nightstand.

This is the thing causing his sudden bout of insomnia- the restless nights he spends staring daggers across the room at the barren, cold divot of Dream's bed, or awaking with sweat-drenched sheets and shortness of breath.

Because visions of acrylic nails in Dream's skin have morphed into blunt ones instead. Because images of long, cascading hair tangled in a ring-adorned fist fades into something short, dark, and mussed. Breasts cupped in large hands turn into flat, masculine muscle.
Residual lipstick melts off scattered hickeys, stubble contrasts against freckled skin, wide hips begin to narrow.
George tries, and tries.
He thinks about his ex. He thinks about the girl who sat three rows down from him in chemistry. All soft curves, smooth skin, twinkling eyes, and mascara on lashes.
But he blinks, and all he sees is <i>red</i> , <i>red</i> , <i>red</i> .
Swelling calves, straining tendons, sharp jaws, and soft fingertips. Soft fingertips strumming along guitar cords. Soft fingertips against his chin. Against his lips. Against his-
George groans.
His forehead drops into his palm.
If he thought his imagination was abrasive before, it's infinitely worse now. His brain can't catch up with what his mind's eye paints- fast, sudden, and <i>primal</i> . Where it used to paint slender bodies of women in Dream's arms, it now assaults him with <i>pretty boys</i> , <i>pretty men</i> , <i>pretty</i> , <i>pretty</i> .
Because Dream likes pretty boys. He likes boyish waists and angular jaws. Stubbled skin and corded muscle. Flat chests and defined stomachs. Happy trails and
Right.
George forces his mind to go blank, lest it paints <i>more</i> images for him. An involuntary flush looms on his cheekbones and creeps up his neck.

Associating Dream's nightly routine with men makes him feel vaguely nauseous, highlighted by the churning storm of anxiety in his stomach. At first, the violent reaction had freaked him out. He went through a full-blown internal crisis, because he's not homophobic, <i>he's not</i> , he's really, <i>really</i> not.
But the rolling tide of sickness in his gut still enforces the heavy burden of guilt weighing upon his shoulders.
He doesn't care what Dream does outside this room. He <i>shouldn't</i> care. He shouldn't think about who Dream chooses to pursue, about who he touches and kisses and beds.
But, fuck. He does.
He cares enough to give himself nightmares, to plague his waking days with blurry visages of girls-no, <i>men</i> - who keep Dream warm at night. He cares enough to carve Dream's initials into the blood-red lining of his heart, the backs of his lids, the ridges of his brain.
And it fucking sucks.
Because he doesn't want to see Dream any differently. He's the same. George is the same. Nothing should change, just because Dream likes men.
Nothing.
George exhales unevenly. His eyes flutter shut, and another groan crawls out of his chest. It's carnal- unadulterated and animalistic.
If nothing's changed, why can't he get over it?

He needs to clear his head.

And there aren't many places to do this, not when the ghost of Dream's presence follows his shadow wherever he goes. It incessantly whispers thoughts that are not his own into his ear. And the devil needs an angel to balance out its treachery- its *havoc*- on his soul, but there's no space for one.

Because both his shoulders are held by the devil's hands. Large, coiled, ring-laden hands with claws that sink into his skin and seep poison through his pores.

He feels like he's being infected. So he *runs*.

But the devil is steadfast- a powerful, inescapable entity capable of tearing George down time and time again.

Yet, he tries in vain to escape it in the quickness of his footsteps- hammering rubber soles against concrete stairs as he scales the building of his residential hall. Climbing ten stories leaves him gasping at the top, hands on his knees, knuckles white as fingers dig into his jeans.

There's sweat beaded on his forehead. Some trickles into his vision, dampening dark wisps of eyelashes until it falls, down, down, to the cement floor.

It makes George wish it were raining.

Because he's on the rooftop, cool wind kissing his ruddy cheeks and clear skies overhead. The clouds are light without the threat of storms, and, selfishly, *weakly*, George finds himself wishing the devil's claws would tighten, only slightly, just to see if it would make the heavens split open with cloudburst.

George sits against the brick structure shielding the stairwell from weather-wear, drawing his knees close to his chest. He lets himself breathe for a moment.

The air feels crisp in his lungs, heavy with autumn chill and soil-trodden leaves. There's one to his left; a leaf fluttering with the wind current and loosely being tugged along by Mother Earth's pull.

He thinks it might be red.

It's lost from George's sight once it tumbles off the edge of the building.

Cigarette butts litter the ground around him, likely leftovers from students who'd found this very spot semesters- maybe even *years*- before he did. He imagines a group of friends, chattering and swapping oxygen thick with smoke. Laughter and content voices whispering in the air. But he also imagines a lone soul, sitting in this very spot. A lit cigarette between an index and middle finger, sharing the air with nobody but themselves.

A single set of lungs. Inhaling, exhaling poison.

George's eyes catch on a cigarette by his heel. It's suspiciously whole. There's a singe at the very tip of it; rolled paper blackened but otherwise untouched. As if it'd been thrown away after the first hit- half of an inhale, at most.

He feels silly, thinking about how it came to be like that. How a cigarette, one that looks perfectly primed as a vessel for addictive nicotine, can still be deemed as *not good enough*.

Maybe there's something wrong with it he can't see.

Something off with the taste, the make, the concentration. Perhaps it was faulty.

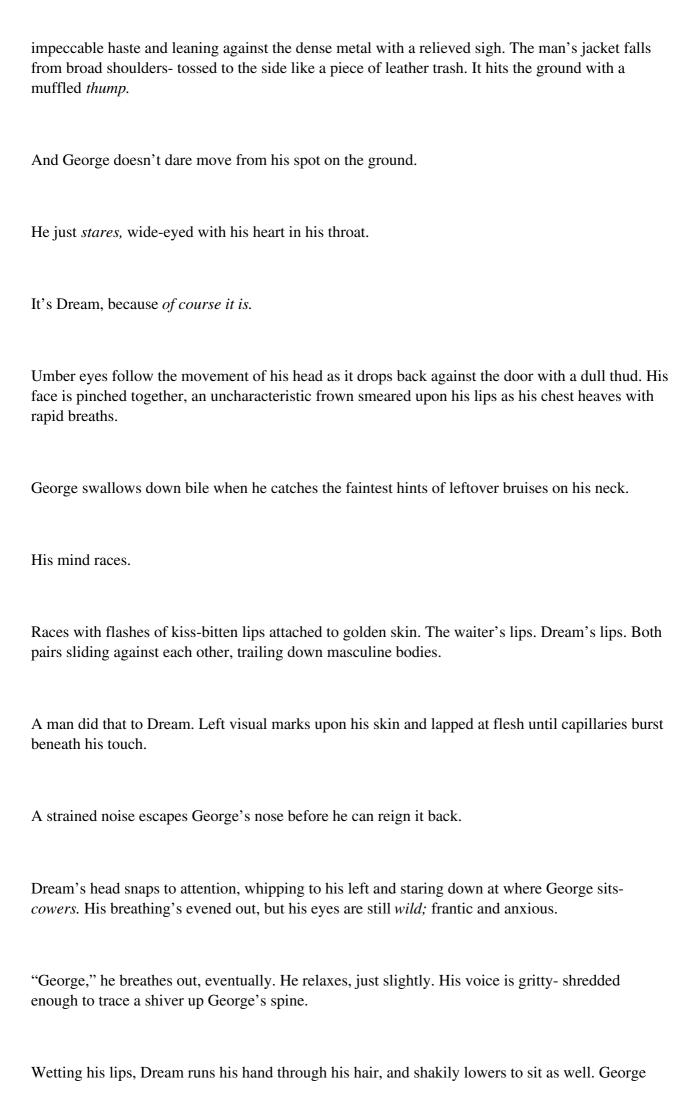
A dud.

There's a foreign prick to his eyes, aching wetness building up at his waterline. His throat closes up. Why does he feel like he's going to cry?

He hates it. Hates feeling like this.

Like there's something wrong with him he can't see, like his life is directionless and unstable-nothing and *nobody* to keep him afloat or put together. He's got nothing going for him but a confusion-addled brain and shackles at his feet. They chain him to the devilish aura over his shoulder.

Unrelenting. Implacable.
George blinks rapidly, willing away the dam threatening to crack his already-delicate foundation. His head drops to his knees, and thin arms loop around jean-clad knees, pulling them impossibly closer to his chest.
He feels small.
Helpless.
He squeezes his eyes shut and grits his teeth.
"What the fuck is wrong with me?"
The murmur is unheard by anyone's ears but his own. He wants to ask someone else. Because he doesn't have the answers- no amount of asking himself will amount to any.
He doesn't know how long he sits here.
It must be awhile, given the stiffness to his joints and the frozen tips of his fingers where the wind had caressed them for too long.
The sky has dimmed. It's getting dark, nightfall looming on the horizon. Pale glimmers of stardust threaten to break through the light left in the day. The moon persists, sitting half-full next to a cluster of clouds.
But, all at once, George's limbs shoot rimrod straight.
Because there are footsteps echoing up the stairwell to his right. They're heavy, pounding up concrete steps with hasty clumsiness.
George goes to stand up, thighs tensing, ready to help him flee at a moment's notice. But he doesn't get the chance, before the door flies open, and a figure darts out, slamming it close with







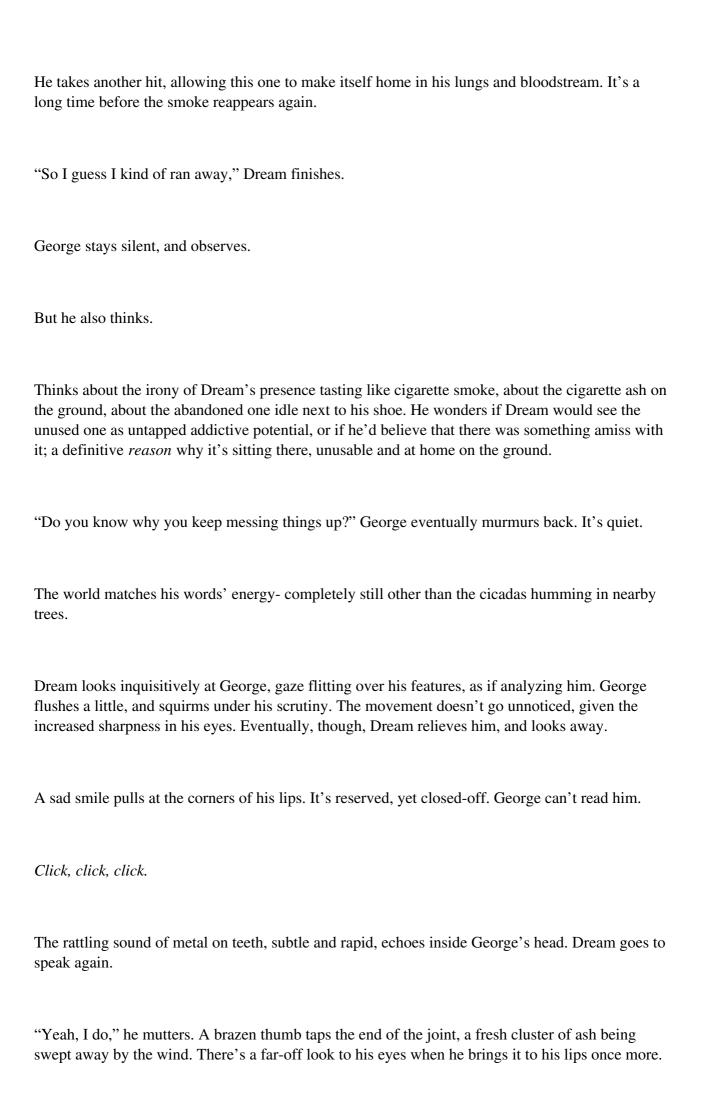
releasing it. There's an unreadable emotion in his eyes when they turn to settle on George.

Sadness, frustration, glimmery hope, perhaps.

"I-" Dream starts, then cuts himself off. His lips purse together, and his brows draw close, enough to furrow the skin between them. "I'm really shitty sometimes."

For once, George can sense Dream's hesitance. He can see the nerves, the bottled feelings, the slight quiver of his hands where they hold a materialized addiction. Ash sprinkles the ground between Dream's knees. It joins the fallen cigarette butts.

"I said something I didn't mean to say to my- my date tonight," he stutters out the word 'date' like it's despicable. Like it's gone rotten, festering in his mouth and decaying the enamel of his teeth. "It was... embarrassing. But also really, really shitty of me. I've been doing that a lot lately."



Breathes in, breathes out. Lit embers flare up; a bright glow against the cool sky. "But I don't think I can stop," Dream says, no louder than a whisper.

Any words that may have been convinced to fall from George's lips dry up and coat sand on his tongue. He doesn't know what to say.

So, he stays silent, and so does Dream, for a while. It's not awkward, nor is it uncomfortable, which George feels slightly perturbed by. Because, really, this *should* be awkward, in theory.

The devil manifested on the ground next to him, a disintegrating addiction dangling between claws soaked with George's blood. Unsaid words suspended in the air between their bodies; neither man making a move to grab for them, let alone make sense of them.

It's quiet, so, so quiet.

But it's peaceful. Soothing, almost.

The wind picks up, tousling hair and nipping at skin. George feels a violent shiver wrack the expanse of his body, while Dream just sits, perfectly content in a tee shirt.

But then, there's fabric in his peripheral. Dream holds it out, hanging from a single finger while he takes a particularly long hit.

Dream's jacket.

And George just *stares*, like a deer caught in headlights, eyes wide as sweltering stars. He recognizes the offer with ease, and yet, he hesitates. Because how many times has Dream done this? How many times have women and men alike been caressed by the insides of this very jacket, gooseflesh-riddled skin blanketed by *Dream*, *Dream*, *Dream*.

But the jacket is just thrust further into his face.

"Just take the damn coat, princess. I promise it doesn't have gay cooties, or whatever you're worried about," Dream muses, swaying the material in a way that's meant to be enticing.

And just like that, George's internal fear kicks into overdrive. Words pour like a faucet, the dam crumbling faster than he's prepared for. "*No*, Dream, I don't think- I mean, I don't care that youthat you..." His throat closes up again. He's panicking, heart thundering in his ears, cold sweat slicking his palms.

Dream raises an eyebrow. "You can't even *say* it, George. You've been staring at me like I'm a fucking ghost since you found out I'm bi."

"I know," George affirms. He takes a rattling breath. "I *know*. But I swear I don't care, Dream. I really, *really* don't. I think I'm just confused, about a lot of things, right now. But I'm not-".

But Dream cuts him off with a dismissive wave. It seems final, like etching George's name on a tombstone. "George, I know you're not homophobic. It's alright, calm down." Instead of waiting for a response, Dream catches the joint between his teeth and uses both hands to drape the jacket over George's shoulders. Something vaguely anxious flutters in his chest when soft fingers brush the bare skin of his arm.

It's warm.

George's mouth snaps shut, glued close in a taut line. He wished for it to rain, but now, he's strangely sated. Because his senses flood with storm-drenched pavement and damp soil. Misty wind and swirling clouds.

Dream leans back again, and holds the joint out, in his direction. An offer.

The way he does it, so *prettily*, almost makes George want to indulge. He lets his gaze linger on the end where Dream's lips had occupied just seconds prior, and imagines his own wrapping about the same space. Imagines the dampness of the paper where Dream's tongue had nicked it. Imagines tracing his own along the edges, tasting cannabis and risk.

Inhaling, exhaling poison. A swap, from one mouth to another.

It's a dangerous, dangerous thought. He can't.

So he waves him off with an, "I'm good," and compensates the loss by tugging Dream's jacket tighter around himself.

There's a multitude of questions George could launch off his tongue. But he chokes them down, instead, and wallows in the reigning silence. It's barely another five minutes before Dream sighs, hauling himself to his feet. He drops the disintegrating remains of the joint and smothers it beneath the pressure of his boot-clad toe, crushing ash into fine dust.

For a moment, he just looks down at George. And George returns the gaze with a tentativeness he's gotten far too acquainted with nowadays. But, green eyes eventually leave the expanse of his face, and flicker lower.

Then, he's crouching.

George wants to curse at himself, when he unintentionally flinches, curling further into himself. The grip he has on Dream's jacket increases tenfold, and he's sure there'll be zipper-sized indents carved into his palms when it loosens.

Dream just sends him an unreadable look, then reaches out a hand.

It pauses by his heel. Fingers tap at his ankle, and George blinks a few times at the contact. He shuffles them away, as if feebly trying to escape the persistent claws of his devil incarnate.

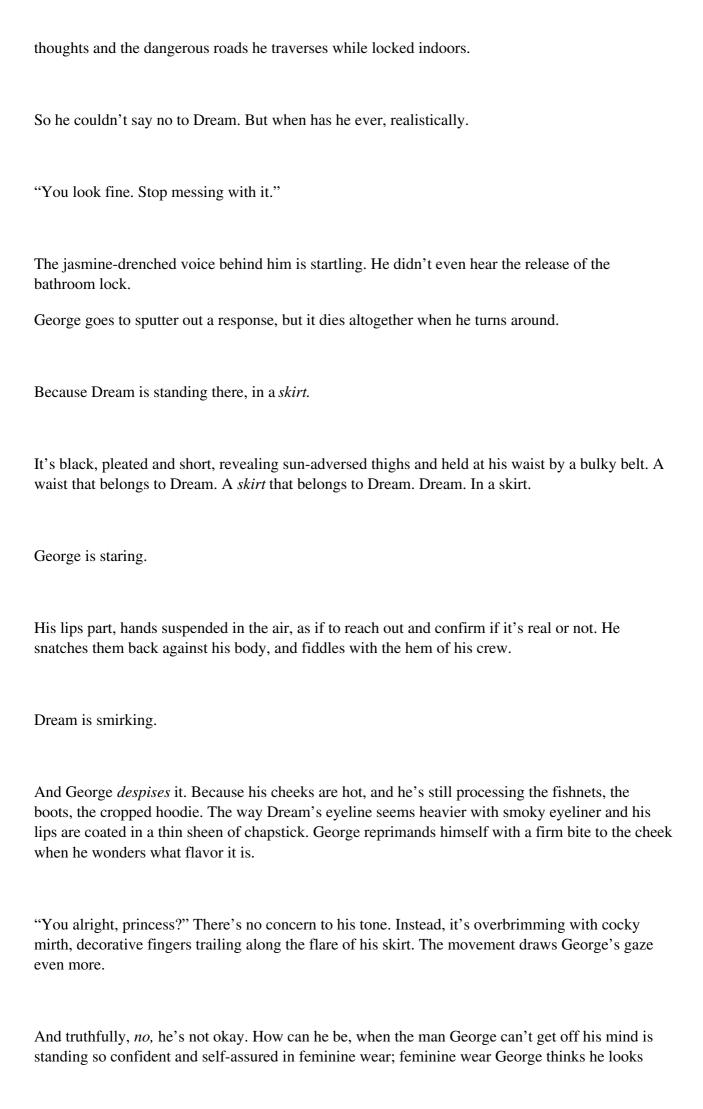
But Dream ignores this in favor of gently grasping something between two knuckles. His fingertips avoid grazing it's surface, as if it'll corrupt the downy softness of skin there.

It's the cigarette.

Whole, hardly scuffed, and blackened just *faintly* at one end. He rolls it a few times along the webbed skin and rings between his fingers, as if feeling the innards through layers of paper and flesh.

George holds his breath.

Then, Dream sinnes, looks up at George unough honeyed lashes, and says, what a waste.
The words simmer beneath George's skin. They creep through his veins and kickstart a frenzy of hummingbird wings against the hollows of his chest. It feels as if a stone in his stomach lifts, a feeling of intense relief washing over him.
Dream thinks it's wasted potential.
Warmth teases the top slats of his ribs when Dream sets- <i>not drops</i> - the cigarette on the ground once more. George doesn't dare <i>breathe</i> when Dream's hand comes to rest on the apex of his knee. The metal feels cold through the material of his jeans. His thumb rubs a single, terse circle against the outside of his thigh.
But George is so focused on trying to ebb the frantic beating of his heart to notice Dream standing up once more.
A snide smirk, a pat-down of his clothes, and Dream holds out a hand. It's another offer. George goes to take it this time, but falters a bit, when Dream opens his mouth to speak.
His next words shock his heart back into regularity.
"Let's go to a party, Georgie."
George doesn't know how he got here.
Standing before a mirror in a baby blue crew neck and ripped jeans, fretful hands pushing and tucking out-of-place strands of hair until he feels crazy.
He hasn't been to a party since late last year. And while George would be more inclined to stay in bed all day, he can recognize the unhealthiness of it. He can recognize his incessant self-destructive





Skirts are crafted for delicate waists and flaring hips, for curvaceous women and shapely swells of fat and muscle. For *girls*, for pretty women with soft thighs, for planes of tight stomachs and wiry limbs, for attractive people with long, *long* legs and hip dimples and facial piercings and-

Fuck. Dream looks really, really good in a skirt.

George wets his lips and takes a few steps towards the door as well. It feels like he's signing his fate, stepping through the threshold and out into the unforgiving hallway- a stark contrast to the unhealthy comfort within their dorm room.

"Seriously, though," Dream looks back for a moment. "You never know until you try one on yourself."

There's more to that statement, more *implications*, but George just purses his lips together and says nothing. *Thinks* of nothing. It's for the best.

And maybe George stares a little *too* intensely at the way the fabric bounces and sways with Dream's steps- how the swishing of ebony against milky skin contrasts even in the darkness of night.

The walk is mostly painless- just a fifteen minute trek through campus, towards the townhouses to the eastside.

Dream had explained he was invited by a friend of a friend, and that he thought the time out would be good for both of them. Of course, George was, and still *is*, bewildered, because *why* would Dream want to take *him* with? And, to be fair, he was never rewarded a straightforward answer.

It was dodged with, "I dunno. Circumstance, I guess," or "They said I could bring someone," or "Are you coming or not, princess?".

So, here they are.

Standing in the entryway of a grandiose college townhouse, with Greek-style pillars to their sides and tall ceilings overhead. Clusters, *blurs*, of people and excitable voices make his comprehension fly out the window. Cool-toned lights flicker on ivory walls, painting each room in a carefree aura. Beer bottles, cans, and confetti pepper the floor- hardly noticeable under the swamping darkness of

swaying bodies and overwhelming music. He feels each beat of the bass-heavy instruments thunder through his chest. It rattles his insides around, and further shatters his devil-acquainted soul. Nostalgia washes over him, just for a moment. A party, akin to one like this. Long hair in his vision, bubblegum lips and a drunken smile, hands on hips and false love on tongues. Sweat-slicked necks and bumping of limbs. There are soft fingers threaded through his own. A smaller body in his arms. Flowery perfume and two hearts sidled against each other- one free and one cursed. One leading and one following. One hers, one his. He needs a drink. George vaguely senses the presence of Dream behind him as he scurries towards the kitchen, but he's so focused on keeping his dinner down that he hardly notices. It's quieter in here, but it does little to soothe the frantic panic in his mind. His hands are practically trembling when he goes for a vodka and soda, fumbling with the flap at the crest of the can. It's slick with condensation, his hands with cold sweat. It culminates in a recipe for disaster- fingers unable to find purchase on the slippery aluminum, heart pounding in his throat. But then, it's taken from his grasp, given back after a momentary sound of metal clanking and the released hiss of carbonation. George shrewdly takes it from Dream's grip. The nerves at the joints of his knuckles flare up when his fingers drag along the back of his hand in the exchange. He downs half the can in one go, throat burning with intense fizz and a pleasant burn chasing behind it. When he wipes his lips clean with a sleeve, he notices Dream just standing therestaring.

"What?" George is almost proud of how well he manages to school his inflection.

Dream looks perplexed. "Are you alright? You went, like, all freakazoid on me for a sec."

Taking another sip, George scrunches his nose. "It's been a long week." And Dream probably doesn't buy it, but he shrugs all the same, and digs through the cooler for a few moments.

It's rather surprising, when he pulls out a *sprite*, of all things.

"You're not drinking? We didn't drive, or anything," George questions. He raptly watches a drop of water trail down the bulk of his hand, wetting skin and landing on his skirt.

Dream laughs, fucking *laughs*, like it's the funniest thing George has said to him. And George involuntarily goes blank, because *wow*, he's never heard Dream laugh like this.

It's sweet and airy- wheezy and boisterous. Addictive, contagious, and blooming with something warm like sunlight. It brings out subtle dimples in his cheeks, and the twinkle in his eye with each bout of laughter. George is stunned into silence, and he feels a slight flush rise to his face.

He blames it on the alcohol.

Dream eventually comes down and brings his hand to his mouth, covering his lips as the chuckles die out.

"George," Dream starts, eyes scrunched in amusement, "I don't drink."

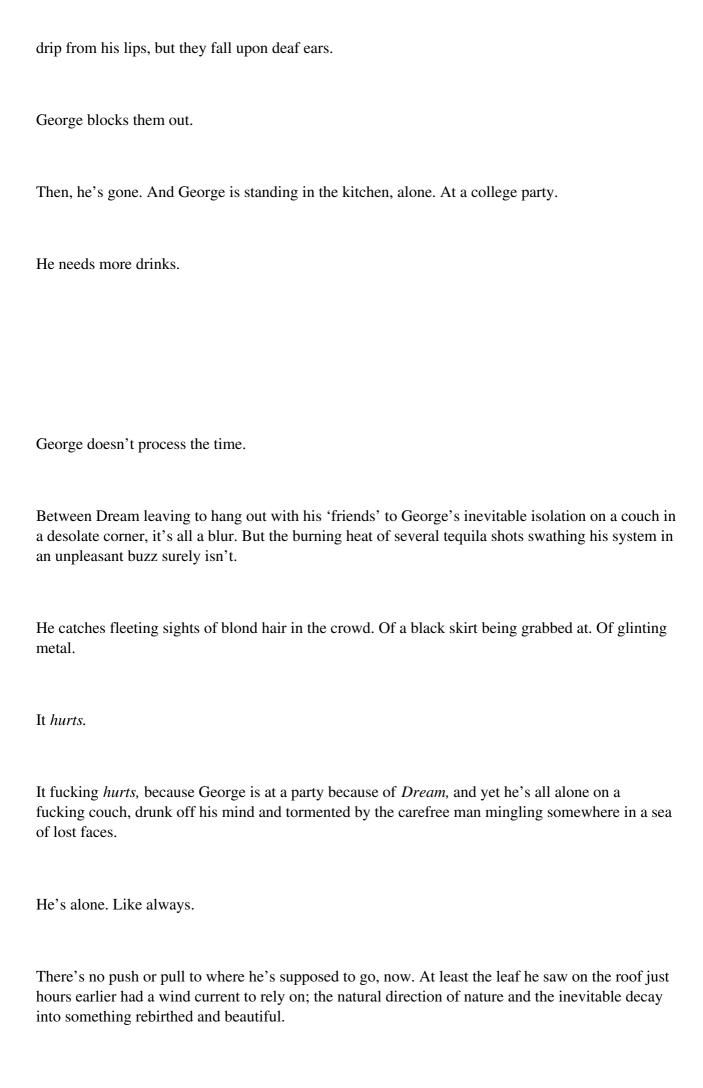
To say George is shocked in a *vast* understatement. The idea of this man, with metal embedded into cartilage and a pack of joints under his belt, *not* drinking just seems unfathomable.

George covers his blatant shock with another long sip of his drink. He speaks without really thinking. "You look like you would, though."

And Dream just cocks an eyebrow. Swirls the can in between his fingertips, swishing the liquid contents and listening to bubbles *pop* against the aluminum walls.

"You know, just because I *look* like I would, doesn't mean I do. Just like how you didn't think I







But his eyes. His eyes are all him. All *George*. Focused on him, reflecting his tired, tired face-filled with worry for *him*.

It makes George want to kick and scream and tear at his skin. But he just lets word vomit craft it's path from tongue to ears, instead.

"Why'd you leave me alone?" George says. Sadness permeates somewhere in his chest. "That was a *dick* move, Dream. You can't just take someone to a party and- and fucking *leave* them." He knows he probably sounds a bit ridiculous. But there's vodka in his veins and bottled emotion painted behind his lids. He can't bring himself to care.

Dream blinks a few times. Heavy guilt draws a thick frown upon his lips.

"I know," he starts. The hand on George's shoulder moves to his back. "They weren't gonna leave me alone until I hung out with them for a bit. 'M sorry, Georgie. Guess I thought you might've found someone here who you recognized, since I couldn't find you for a while."

The overwhelming frustration and confusion; it both creates a cocktail of mounting, slurred syllables. "I was in the kitchen getting *drunk*, Dream," George nearly spits.

If Dream's taken aback by this, he doesn't show it. "Ah," he responds. "I'm sorry." It's genuine. His brows are drawn together, as if he's in pain.

George hates that he wants to reach and smooth them out.

"I won't leave you again tonight, okay?"

George does little more than huff in reply. He doesn't even have the energy to scoot away when Dream drapes an arm along the back of the couch and leans in close. If George is drunk, he feels even more so when the aroma of thunderstorms and cannabis cloud his rationality. It's a deadly concoction; the devil's essence mingling with the pertiance of alcohol.

They're silent for a bit. Simply observing the swell and sway of people in the darkened crowd; bodies seeking bodies, hands seeking waists, mouths seeking necks.

Dream's eyes are trained on a woman by the adjacent wall. George only knows this because he's staring at his face. "What do you think about her?" Dream's question shocks George out of it a bit, and he forces his gaze towards the girl he's addressing. Even through the glazed smog of intoxication, he can recognize conventional attractiveness when he sees it. She's relatively tall; bottle-like figure and long legs, silky hair tied in a knot and eyelashes thick enough to challenge false ones. But there are alarms in his ears. A needle piercing his chest and bile climbing his throat. Because he can recognize her attractiveness, maybe even appreciate it to some extent. Yet, he's desireless. Barren of want, of pooling lust or a sense of allure. There's nothing. So his eyes are searching. They're scanning the room, seeking attraction and physical connection. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. That is, until they make their way back to Dream. Because then, there's a sudden churning emotion behind his eyes, a rising flush to his cheeks, and a stirring in his core. His mouth goes dry. From the alcohol- from *circumstance*. "George?" Dream prompts. Hot puffs of breath land and disperse on the side of George's face.

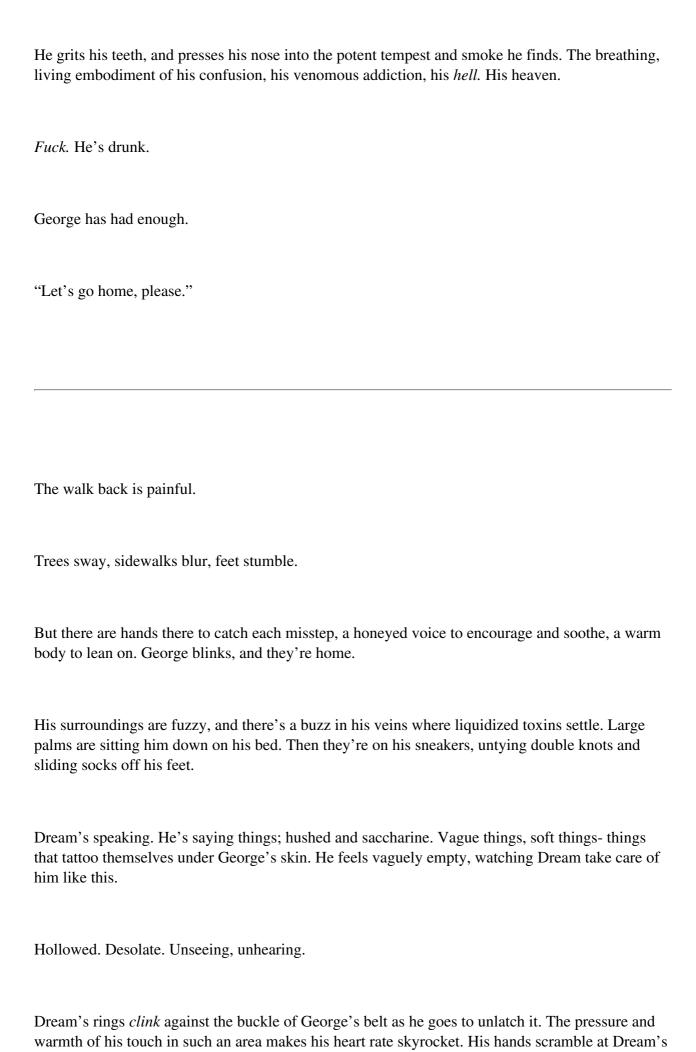
Arm practically around his shoulders, thigh brushing his own, silver studs so near he can see his reflection. George gapes a bit.

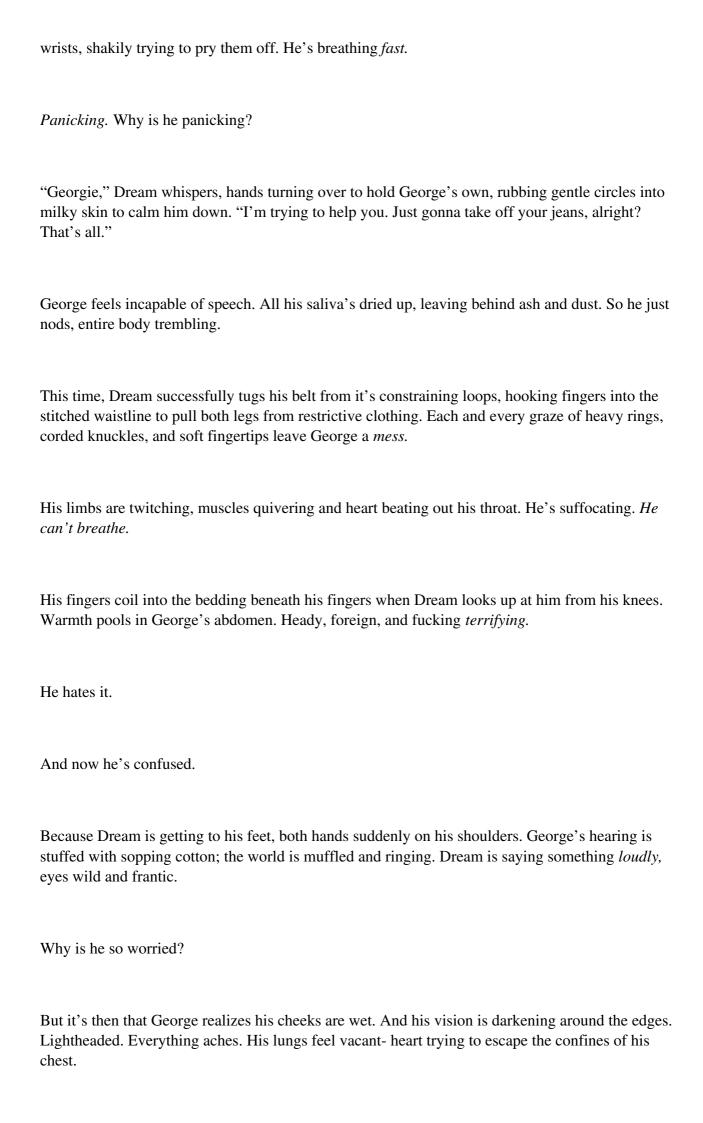
When did he get so close?

Dream's eyes flicker down to the movement of his parted lips, and they linger. George thinks he's

going crazy. He has to be. So his gaze returns to the girl, if only to put slight distance between himself and temptation. He's trying again. He's straining with the effort to dig through himself- to uncover the love and arousal and affection he'd once held for beautiful girls like these. For his ex, for the ones he'd meet at bars, for the intelligent ones, the confident ones, the *stable* ones. Nothing. Fucking nothing. A burning ache closes his throat. His eyes flutter shut, and the room spins faster. George's body gives up, slumping into Dream's side and lacking any care he can't bother to muster. It's warm. Dream is warm. George's heart is cold. Inexplicable sadness and loss and regret and disappointment; it all drowns him. It nestles in his lungs and suffocates his airways. It infects his vision, his mouth, his veins. The arm around his shoulder pulls him in, just slightly. A rattled exhale, and George is ready to split at the seams. So he does. "What's wrong with me, Dream." It's a statement, not a question. Murmured lowly, hardly audible if not for the proximity between them. He feels a frown disgrace Dream's lips from where they're pressed to the crown of his head. But there's no response. George is tired. He's so, so tired. His heart is spent, as is his pride.

Nothing feels worse than this, he decides.





He's gasping, but air leaves as quick as it came.

Dream's palms are on his cheeks. He's saying something, pupils dilated and *frightened*.

"...the... calm d... rge... Br...the!"

Breathe. Dream's telling him to breathe.

So he tries, hiccuping and sputtering and gasping through each inhale and exhale. They breathe together, him and Dream. Schooling lungs and allowing oxygen to flood his system. The black border around his vision slowly recedes, until all he can see is *red* and *Dream*, *Dream*, *Dream*.

"...there. You're ... okay. It's okay."

George's hearing comes back- slowly. It's blurred and too-quiet. But it's there. The sound of Dream's voice is like coming home.

"Look at me. You're alright," he says. George wants to believe him. "Describe to me where you are, George."

His breathing is still labored, unsteady and hoarse, but he manages. For Dream. "D-Dorm... My side."

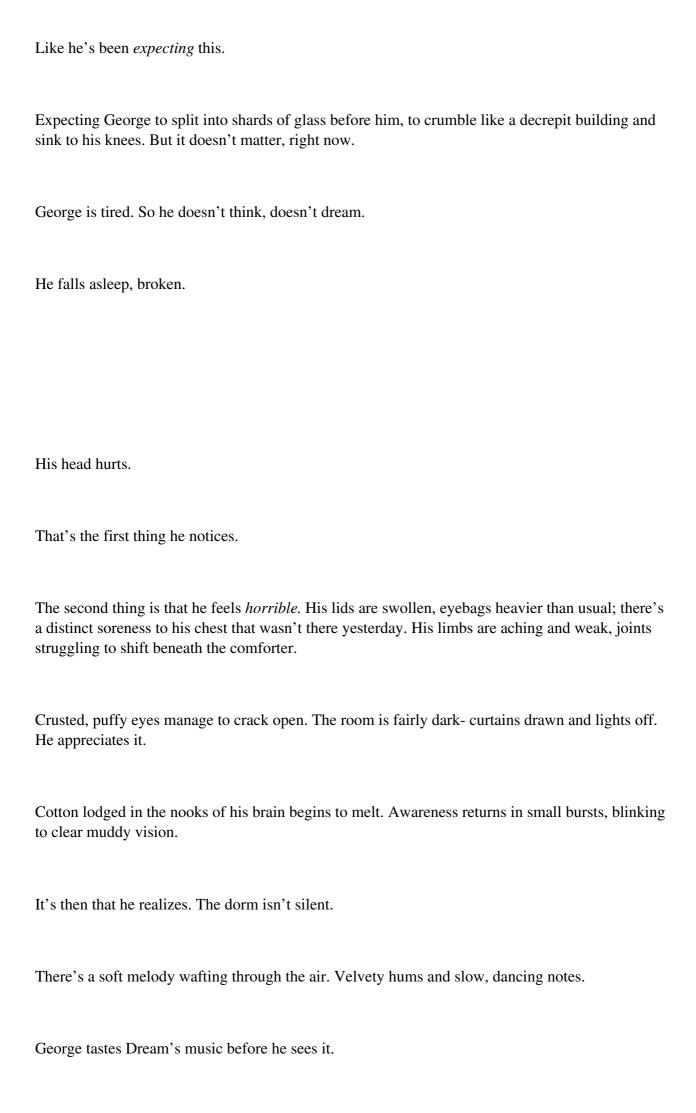
Dream nods. "Good. What color?"

George's eyes are obscured by fat tears and clumped lashes, but he looks around anyway. "Dark... it's- it's dark. L-Like blue..." He hiccups again.

Another wave of materialized sorrow threatens his waterline. It breaks through with ease, and more tears fall. His throat closes up, eyes stinging.

He can't stop crying.

"George..." Dream looks so... sad. There's pity in his gaze, gentleness in his touch. And George can't stand it. So he breaks. Splits apart and shatters like porcelain on tile, falling forward into Dream's chest and clinging to the fabric of his hoodie like a lifeline. He's full-on sobbing now, but at least his lungs are working. The cloth beneath his face is soaked in seconds. Each sob wracks through his spine and delivers jolts to each of his limbs. Pain makes itself known in battered cries, slipping like a faucet from sore lips. The returned embrace of Dream's arms makes the nerves of his skin crawl and sing at the same time. A few minutes pass, and they're lying down on the bed. George doesn't remember when his world turned horizontal. Ruddy face buried in Dream's chest, arms looped around a body that burns and kills him, ever-so-slowly. Dream's hand cups his neck and brings him close. He's murmuring encouragement and shushing his cries. But George is speaking, too. Words of spite and hatred; both towards himself and the devil wound about his limbs. They're incoherent and drunk on lingering intoxication. "Hate you, hate you..." George sobs. He's not sure if he means it, or not. And Dream just lets him- no complaints or sudden movements. Just sweet lips and palms, everywhere at once. It's like he's been prepared.



Because Dream's not in his bed. The strumming of guitar strings takes a second to register, but when it does, he realizes it's coming from *behind him*.

Ignoring the hammering nausea in his skull, he shifts, lying flat on his back to look over his shoulder. He's a bit shocked to find Dream on *his* bed. Leaning against the wall, legs draped over George's own. His feet are dangling just off the edge, acoustic guitar in his hands. Blond lashes obscure green eyes, kissing his freckled cheeks as confident hands finger across each chord-fluent and pretty.

He must've changed into more comfortable attire at some point, last night. There are gaps and holes in George's memory, as if a sheer screen has been laid overtop of it.

But he does recall falling asleep warm. He remembers why, but pretends he doesn't. Because thinking about it will make things worse.

So George just stares, for a while. Infatuated.

Dream's music is calming. Like waves lapping lazily at the pebbled shore of the sea. Like the drip of dew on morning leaves. Like a dispersed cloud of smoke in the night sky.

It ebbs the frantic pounding of his head, if just for a moment.

But then, Dream stops. It's when recognition graces his expression. The silence is abrupt; the last note cut off prematurely. Dream's eyes are still shut.

The room feels strangely tense, when mute stillness reigns overhead once more. George observes Dream's brows furrow, as if perplexed. Then, his eyes are open, half-lidded and trained on the wall across from them.

And now, he's speaking. George wishes he wasn't.

"Do you like guys, George?"

Pierced lips caress dreaded syllables. *Overwhelming* syllables. George feels the world disappear beneath him, when the low timbre of Dream's voice reaches the grasp of his ears.

He sits up, *fast*. The world spins, but George tries to ignore it- bites down the after effects of booze and disorientation. The sand on his tongue is swallowed with difficulty, blinking the threads of dreary sleep from his vision.

Panic attacks are something he doesn't often deal with. But the one from last night still has its hands around his neck; it's leaving rings of bruises about the column of his throat, reminding him, reminding *everyone*, of his fate.

The chokehold grows firmer.

Indignation and trepidation- *raw panic*- seize his body and make him their toy- stringing him along like a puppet when his mouth opens, and words tumble out.

"No. No, no, no, Dream. Fuck," he curses, head dropping to his palm. Fingers ground into his scalp, digging trenches into brunette hair and nails tearing at skin. He feels fucking sick, again. But not from the hangover. "I'm- I'm straight, Dream. I had- I had a girlfriend. For years. Fuck, what the fuck."

Even George doesn't believe the words. They're not his own.

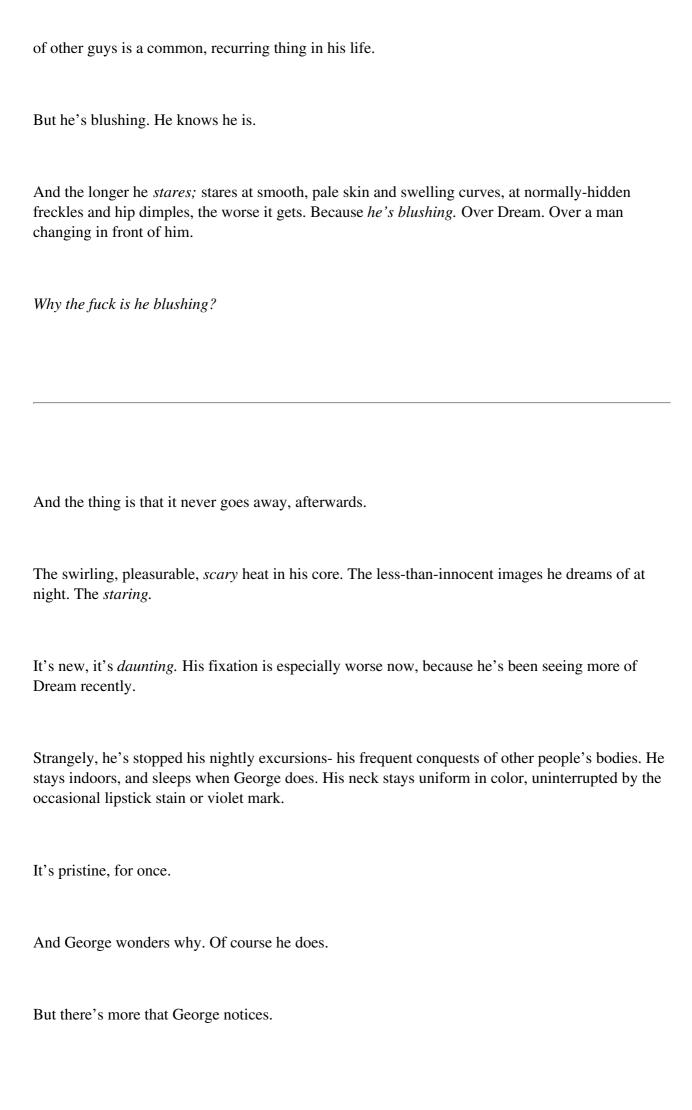
When he manages to fight the stinging curse of bile down, he looks up once more.

Dream's head is tilted against the wall. He's staring at him. His eyes are swimming with *something*; something George can't pin down. He seems sad again- the frown etched into his lips deepening.

Not disappointment. Just... painful recognition.

Then, he sighs, long and exasperated. He goes boneless against the wall, features pinching together. "Sorry. It's just... you remind me of myself, in a fucked-up kind of way," he breathes. Before George can ask *what the hell he means by that*, Dream is standing up. The bed shifts with his weight when he goes to tuck his guitar away with an acidic lock and key.





It's that Dream has also started smoking. A lot.

There are times the smell of weed is so saturated it burns George's eyes. Claws at his sinuses and stings his nose.

But, somehow, it feels right. *Normal*. Like his lungs are *meant* to be filled with poison and oxygendeprived air. Filled with something *Dream*.

But what feels decidedly *not* right, are the thoughts he's having.

George is accustomed to confusion. He's accustomed to his less-than-ideal fixation on Dream. What he's *not* accustomed to, however, is the sudden influx of nights he wakes up drenched in sweat, a problem straining below the sheets and heat in his veins.

It's embarrassing- frustrating and jarring. Having to creep to their shared bathroom for cold three a.m. showers and a change of clothes. It's becoming more frequent than it should be.

It makes him feel like a fucking teenager.

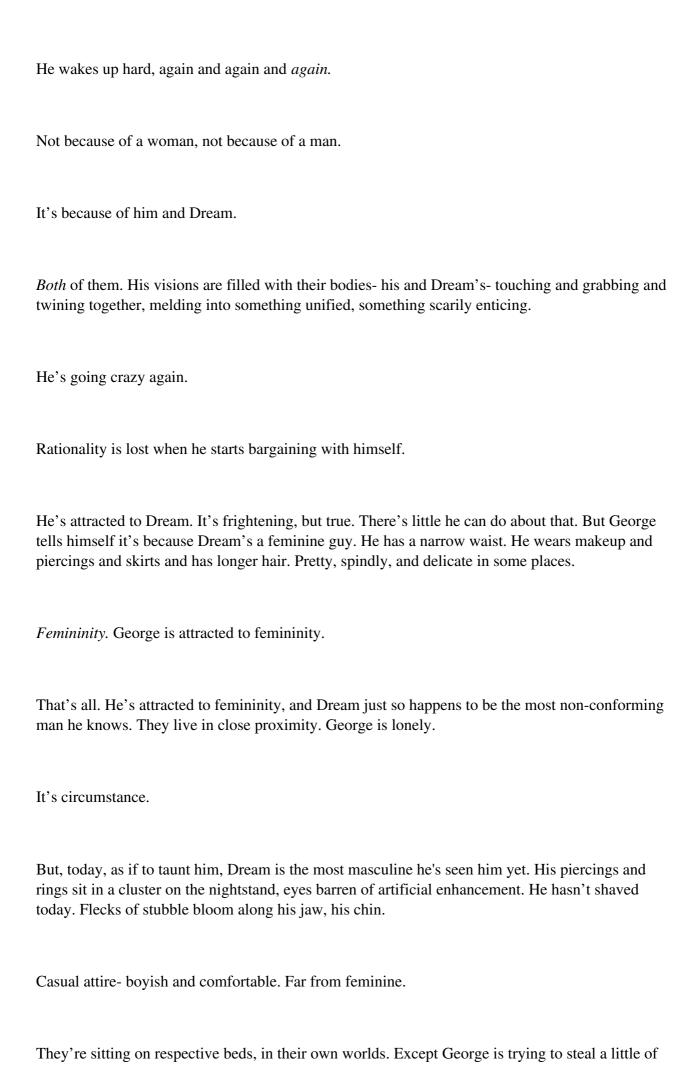
But what's worse is the *context*. The thoughts that *put* him in these humiliating situations. The nightly escapades into ignorant bliss, haunted by his inner desires that remain unknown, despite how desperately George tries to reach inside himself.

There's a distinct lack of feminine attributes in his dreams. And, in the same way, there are no masculine ones, either. Instead, it's something in-between.

Something distinctly separate-unique.

It's fleeting paintings of thin waists; hands tugging at them. It's images of large palms, then small ones; both sets tracing along planes of iridescent shades of skin and bellies. It's legs, some long and sturdy and others reminiscent of his own, both tangled together.

Skin on skin. Lust on lust. A pierced tongue on his panic-ridden throat. Rings between knuckles. Dimples at hips.



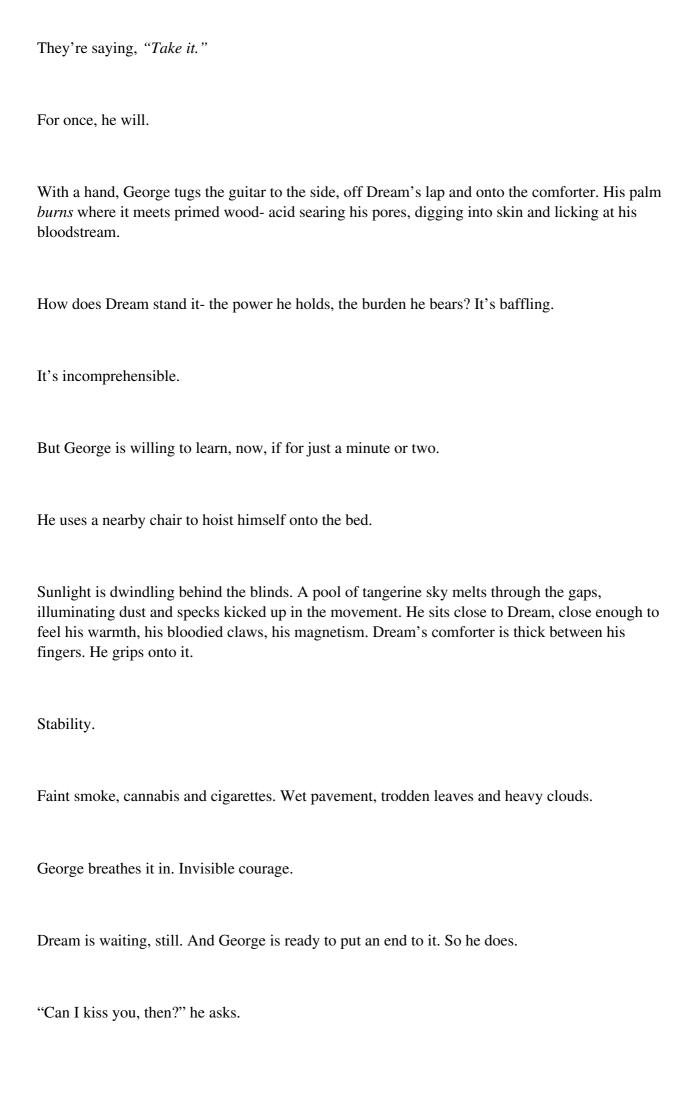
And he feels no earth-shattering shift inside him at this change, like he thought he might. He's the same. He <i>feels</i> the same. And really, he shouldn't push it. He should give up now, and forget about the shift in Dream's appearance.
Thunder rattles the inside of his skull as he tries to leave it at just that.
Dream looks like a man today.
George is not supposed to be drawn to his face, his lashes, his five o'clock shadow.
But he always looks like a man.
Right.
It's a thought he's been avoiding; foolishly setting it to the side as if he forgot he put it there in the first place. Because Dream is still a man. He identifies as one. He <i>is</i> one. No matter what he's wearing. No matter the makeup, the skirts, the jewelry.
George's hands tremble where he picks at the creased edge of his notebook. He tries to convince himself that there's still a chance at some sort of fluke.
That there's a chance he's <i>not</i> attracted to Dream at all. That he's just waiting for the right girl to stumble into his life, like before, and he's having a hard time dealing with it.
He's just alone.
Seeking another person. Anyone. It's out of desperation.
But how can he be sure?

Dream's. By glancing, by thinking, by reaching out.

As George watches Dream across the room, idly tuning his guitar, he thinks about the easy solution just mere feet away. There's another man in this room. One with experience. Recently, he's been thinking of Dream's bisexuality as less of a tormenting itch, and more as opportunity. The swirling illness inside him swelters; it boils, rising with a flood of red, red words and a mix of regret and relief. He's ready to take an opportunity. There's a gap in the woven bars of his cage, and George wants to see the other side. Pressure over pressure, he splits in two. "How did you know?" George's voice is like silverware against china, snapping the terse silence between all four walls. It's enough to make Dream stop in his tracks, hands faltering just above the neck of his guitar. He blinks at George, once, twice; face lax in thought. It's filled with an emotion that's not quite shock, nor disgust. Understanding eventually smooths out sculpted features. He knows the significance of those words. George thinks he sees a slight smile, even. There's a casual aura about Dream that wasn't there before, like his limbs have been stripped of all stress. Relaxed. George feels the opposite, brimming with electricity like a live wire, when Dream's lips part. "I kissed a guy. Felt nice," he says, like it's the simplest thing in the world. George catches a flash of metal behind teeth.

And Dream doesn't give George time to process the words before his fingers are dancing along





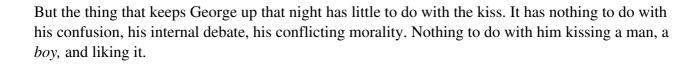
He doesn't recognize his own voice. It's cautious- wary and tired. He's been through hell and back, over and over. It walks with him. It sits on both shoulders and chokes him, stifles him. He wants to leave limbo behind, desperately, achingly. Dream doesn't even seem surprised by the request. There's a glaze to his eyes and a lilt to his mouth that exudes something akin to smugness- slight triumph, even. George falters. Is he *that* predictable? As if reading him, Dream lets a reassuring, warm thumb brush his thigh. George shudders. "Never kissed a guy, I take it?" Dream reaffirms. Trust in his vocal cords fails him. So George nods, and Dream's thumb grows bolder. An index and middle finger join its trek across his thigh; his prints tattoo themselves beneath clothing. Dream is getting closer. Their shoulders are touching, knees bumping and breaths mingling. "Why now?" Dream whispers, like it's a secret, somehow. And, in a way, it is. It's all of George's fears manifested into two words. But he feels oddly safe, right now. Dream makes him feel safe. Where a few nights ago the touch at his thigh might've sent him spiraling, it now leaves him excitable, anticipatory. So he spills. "Because I need to know," George grits out. It shreds the inside of his throat on the way out, as if he's regurgitating razor blades and nails. But the *relief*. The relief is *heavenly*. Because the nails and razors are gone now, and all he sees is

red, red, red.

Red mouths. Red smoke. Red melodies. Dream's fingertips feel like they belong, when they settle just below his jaw. Tracing ash trails along pale skin, tilting his chin up, up. Their eyes meet. Nerve-shattering, intimate, unmoving. A flicker of sadness traverses yellow-green. George's breath hitches. But then it's gone, soon as it came. And lips are on his. It's nothing like what he's used to. George is choking on scarlet, drowning in it. It coats the inside of his mouth and throat, drips down to his stomach and sets it alight. Warm. He feels so warm. His heart slows and thaws, nervousness melting away like ice in the sun. Sunlight. George tastes sunlight when he tastes Dream. Jasmine, smoke, rain... and sunlight. He tilts his head, pressing, pressing, chasing. Dream is smiling. George's heartbeat stutters in his ribs. And suddenly, Dream is everywhere. Because his tongue is slipping through the seam of George's lips, spit on spit and breath on breath. Molten gold doubles, triples in his gut. The hand on his thigh squeezes, and it's enough to pull a noise from his chest. George's lips and tongue are delayed. They're timid, flinching and pliant. He curses at himself, when he realizes. Because he's allowing Dream to lead. Leader and follower.







It has to do with what Dream said to him, just a few days ago.

It's the fact that Dream likes pretty boys.

Sin and Salvation

Chapter Summary

George plays dumb, mostly out of shock— out of hesitance and residual nerves. "What do you..."

His voice dries up.

Dream rolls his eyes. And then, there are hands on his own. Without rings, his touch feels like a hot iron against his skin. George can only *watch* as Dream languidly places his palms, quivering and ice-cold, on the flat planes of his chest.

Goosebumps speckle where George touches.

"Use me."

Dream gives George an interesting proposal.

Chapter Notes

Hellllloooo!!

And, once again, welcome back to Dud Cigarettes! Lots happens this chapter and, as always, I'm very excited to show it to you:)

All of your comments keep me motivated to write and I cannot thank you all enough for the support!

TW Preface:

Panic attacks, explicit sexual content, and alcohol use

Yes... the explicit tag on this finally comes to fruition. However, please remember that this is a slow burn. Advancements are made in this chapter, but it doesn't mean everything is tied up into a pretty bow. People are complicated. Nothing is solved in one day.

There are still three more chapters ;)

Anyway! As always, enjoy, and feedback is very much appreciated. I might be uploading a list of all the motifs/symbols I use in this fic on my twitter, so feel free to follow me there for updates and such! Also major thank-you to my friend who betas all of these chapters! I wouldn't be able to upload without xem!

Twitter

If Dream and/or George ever say they are no longer comfortable with shipping/nsfw, this fic will be immediately taken down.

They don't talk about the kiss.
Even as autumn melts into winter and days shorten and skies gray. A good few weeks pass before the leaves shrivel and grass yellows.
And after all of this, they still don't talk about it.
Not in passing, not in the mornings or the evenings, not at all.
And George isn't quite sure how to feel.
He supposes he should be grateful for the space—the ample amount of breathing room Dream is leaving him. But he finds himself irritated, instead. Like there's an itch beneath his skin he can't quite scratch; an incessant rash that blooms red agitation and spreads like ash in the wind.
But, at the same time, George is <i>terrified</i> to talk about it.
Because while the itch is infuriating, digging into his nerves and blaring alarms in his brain, it also proliferates everytime he touches it.
The more he scratches, the more it spreads.
So maybe it's best to leave it alone. He's scared of the consequences.
The kiss was an <i>experiment</i> ; one-sided and informative, unspecial and brief. Meant for George's benefit and his <i>alone</i> . At least, he's pretty sure it was, based on Dream's whole nonchalance about it.
They'd fallen asleep afterwards— the nerves in George's lips singing with the phantom brush of

pink on pink. He woke up colder than ever. Joints coiled taut with residual stress and rolling

anxiety in his stomach. If he tried hard enough, he could almost feel the lingering of soft finger pads along his jaw, warm digits on his thigh, smoke in his lungs. But he opened his eyes, and Dream was already gone. The bed that'd held the devil and victim last night now lay barren and hollow. The latte left on his desk tasted bittersweet that day. And he pretended he didn't see the smiley drawn crudely on the side with a sharpie. He knew which hands had created the shaky ink lines, which claw-tipped fingers had delicately trapped the plastic of a marker between their grasp—drawing a line and two dots, all for George. Something new had flooded his core at the thought. Fuzzy, warm, and nauseatingly intense. Affection. Which is why George pretended he didn't see it. But, he's weak. And stupid. So, so stupid. So stupid, in fact, that he kept the fucking coffee cup. He feels unbelievably *pathetic* for it. For the lack of ability to throw it away when the time came. It's as if the prints of his skin were glued to the sealed cardboard, heart beating obnoxiously on his tongue and a sinking feeling to his gut. Thousands of these cups existed. Hundreds upon hundreds gripped in burnt-out hands, some dirty and abandoned on the ground, some yet to be used—pristine and stacked with dozens of others. Identical. Uniform.

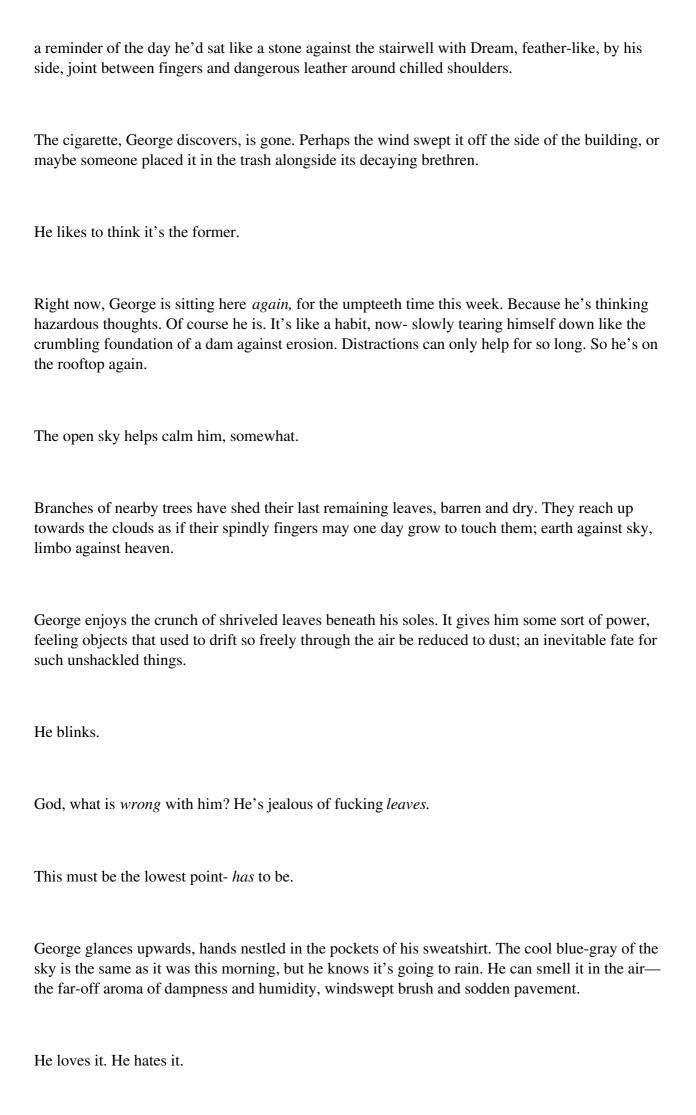
But none of them had a dumb, charming smiley. None of them made George's insides go numb,

made his brain smooth it's ridges, made warmth swirl beneath the surface of aching skin.

So he kept it. Shoved it to the furthest crevasse of his desk drawer, hidden from prying eyes, hidden from himself, like it was a secret. And it was. It was one of the most embarrassing secrets George had added to his arsenal in a long time. He still tries to forget about it. Tries to ignore the tendency for his gaze to flicker to the handle of the drawer, as if he can see through wood. Tries to ignore the hammering pace of his heart in his ears whenever Dream gets close to the damned thing. It's a constant reminder of how far gone he is. Anxiety, endearment, and confusion crowds his brain until he can't see straight. His notes end up falling victim to his restlessness alongside chewed lips and picked-at nail beds. He writes, 'pretty boys' in the margins of his chemistry lecture; he doodles smileys on the dogeared pages of beaten textbooks; he stares at himself in the mirror and tries to pin the description of pretty to his forehead. Attempts to brandish his appearance with Dream's words, as if tattooing a new identity upon his features. And when he fails to find beauty in the exhausted browns of his eyes and the hollowness of his cheekbones, he convinces himself Dream must've lied. George is anything but what Dream likes. He likes pretty boys who are confident and unafraid of themselves. Dream likes pretty boys who dig their nails into his back and carve their mouths into his neck. And it's even worse, now, because the title 'pretty' can't even be associated with any girls George sees, any boys on campus; not himself, not others. When he thinks of pretty, he only thinks of Dream.

George finds himself on the rooftop more often nowadays. It's become a place of sanctity for him-

And that can't mean anything good.



Out here, he still thinks of Dream. But it's less destructive in this atmosphere, somehow. Calmer, logical, and contemplative.

So George thinks about the kiss, as if he hasn't been doing that already for the past two weeks.

He brings two fingers to his lips, just to recall how Dream's had felt against his. The subtle scratch of stubble against George's jaw had been the only indication he'd been kissing a man. Because Dream's lips were tender, just like the tips of his fingers and the gait of his walk. His tongue wasn't repulsive; it was *addictive*, rolling against his own and spilling red down his throat. And his teeth weren't aggressive like how George imagined another man's would be. They were *strategic*, nipping when necessary and withdrawing with a tentativeness he didn't know Dream could possess.

At first, George really couldn't admit to himself that he'd liked it. It was only the morning after that he'd tried to completely dismiss the event entirely. Tried to pass it off as a dream, or as a misunderstanding— a *mistake*.

But it's exhausting lying to himself.

Because when he wakes up hard with the phantom taste of jasmine on his tongue and goosebumps on his thigh, he knows it's because he liked it.

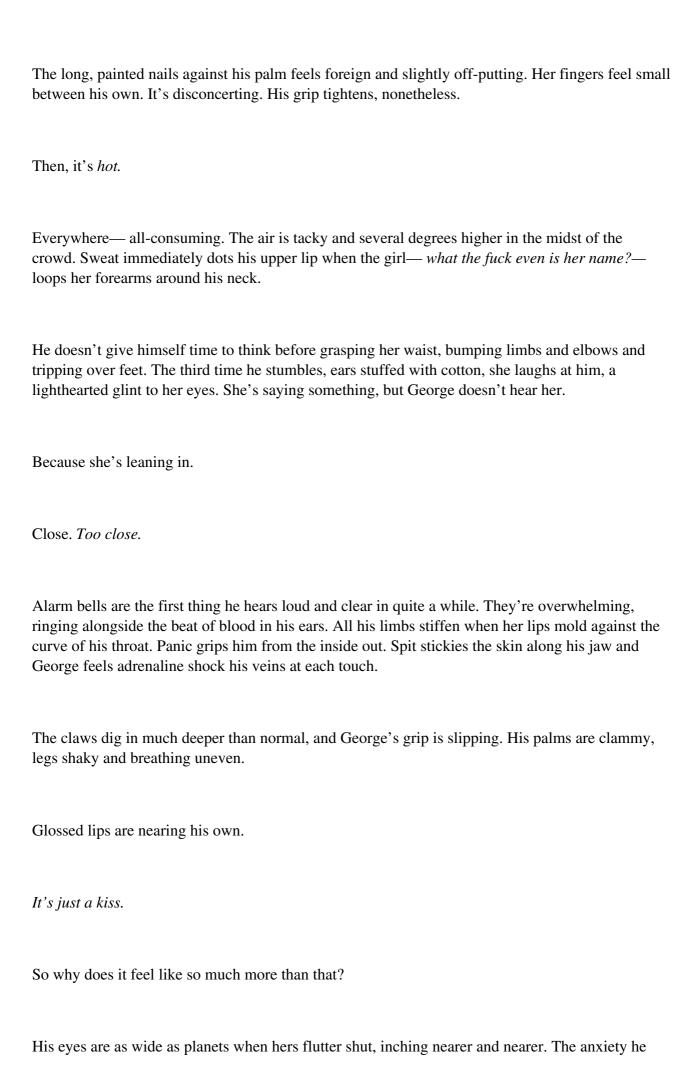
And now, George is more lost than ever.

A puff of materialized breath clouds his vision in the presence of chilled air.

He hasn't been with anyone in months. Hasn't touched, hugged, kissed, fucked, *loved* anyone in so long. So maybe Dream is an outlet for his bodily functions, and nothing more. He's just a guy with a lithe body and lined eyes, living in close proximity, and George is pent-up. Emotionally, sexually, and everything in between.

He grits his teeth and squeezes his eyes shut, trying to cancel the addictive feeling of claws in his shoulders. They're trying to drag him away from limbo, but in the wrong direction. They pull him down, down, and George scrambles up, up.

He finds a foothold.
George turns towards the stairwell. He'll prove it to himself, if the universe won't.
It's strange, being here again so soon.
The same townhouse that Dream had dragged him to weeks ago looms in front of him. The Greek pillars that'd seemed elegant before now look intimidating, and the sound of partygoers doesn't bring him any sort of joy, either.
It's the weekend, and students are mingling in the yard. Most are bundled up in coats and breathing each other's air, laughing and chatting and <i>living</i> . George trudges forward, past a group of girls clad in outfits that <i>must</i> make them cold.
When he enters the gaping entryway, George's heart rate immediately kicks up.
Dozens upon dozens of bodies shift to the thundering beat of music, strobe lights and neon oxygen painting planes of blurry faces luminous. His eyes pointedly ignore the couch to his right, gently shouldering aside stray hands as he makes his way to the kitchen. He chooses a Smirnoff, and lazes against the outskirts of the dance floor.
He gets through one, two, <i>three</i> drinks. All the while, he watches girls pass, their eyes flickering down and up, offering him cherry lips over ivory teeth.
It doesn't take long for one of them to approach.
A blond girl chats with him for a while. She's sweet and smooth like silk, and they're both a bit tipsy. George laughs at her jokes, and she giggles back, airy and high-pitched. It's as if he's chasing an angel, when she inevitably grasps his hand in her own, pulling him towards the mass of swaying bodies.



feels this time doesn't carry the same tinge of excitement it had when he'd kissed Dream.
Dream.
Fuck.
George pulls back before her mouth can crawl any higher. He looks salvation in the eyes. She's confused, brows drawn together, lips plump in a way that should be desirable.
He feels nothing.
The moments before he kissed Dream were terse and anticipatory. It had made his insides turn to mush, instincts crying out to close their gap. But here, there's nothing but hesitation. A swirl of nausea and a storm of regret.
The foothold crumbles, and George is falling.
Yet, there's a part of him that refuses to give up. A part of him that digs his fingers in a little harder, works his muscles and swallows breaths sharp as knives.
The universe is fighting him. He's going to fight back.
George grabs her shoulders and bites down the acidic bile in his throat, turning her around and pressing the line of his body against her back. She lets out a gasp- he can faintly hear it, when he presses taut lips against the delicate curve of her shoulder. They refuse to open and let her skin touch his tongue.
He doesn't close his eyes. Because he knows what sorts of images will replace the darkness behind his lids.
She smells like floral shampoo and citrus perfume. It's so pungent and saturated— like it's trying to mute the lingering memory of smoke and rain in his nose. But it does nothing but make him grasp for the fading scent, instead

It's pathetic. Involuntarily chasing after the essence of peril incarnate, scrambling upwards but wanting desperately to just *let go*.

His mouth doesn't move. Maybe the girl is too drunk to notice or to care, but she doesn't say anything about it, either way. They sway side to side with the crowd. George still feels like his tempo is off, somehow. Her waist feels small between his palms—narrow and feminine, swooping and delicate. Long hair tickles his chin every now and then. He can see over her head; she's a few inches shorter than him.

It all feels wrong.

It's like failing to snap together the clasps of a jacket. Everything is there; perfectly aligned buttons that can easily find their partners. But, somehow, none of them *click*. There's no satisfying *snap* of metal fitting with plastic, no way to keep the lapels of the jacket together at the middle. They flutter open, and everything is wrong.

Everything is wrong.

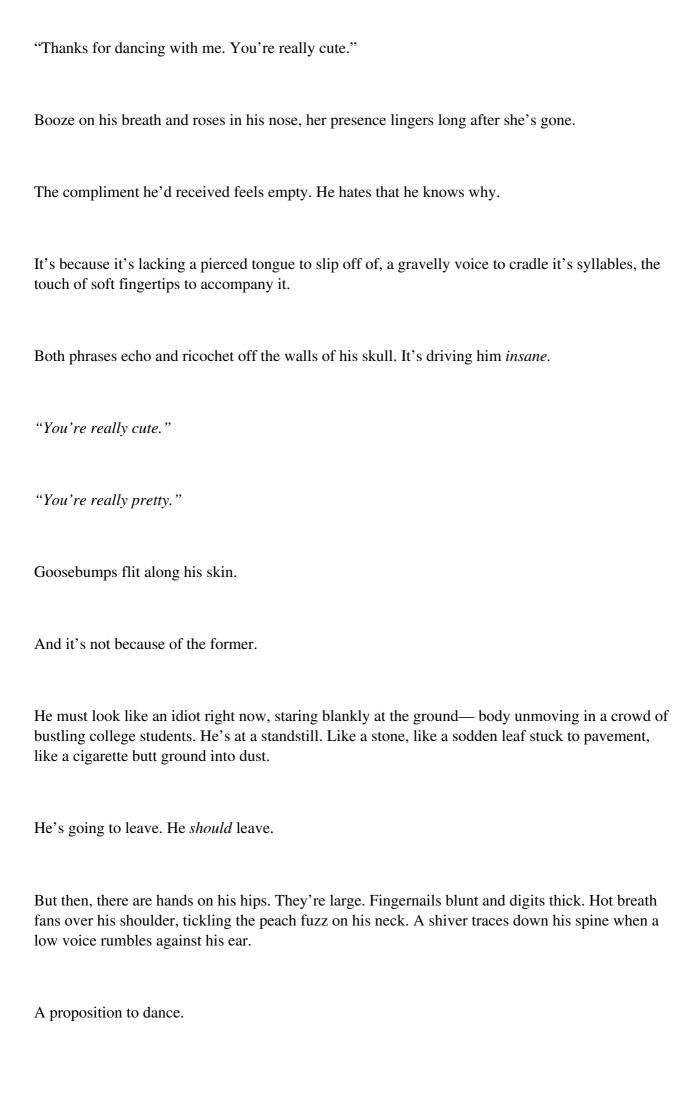
The line of his lips against pristine skin grows into something tight with disgust. Sickness swells in his chest. He blinks away frustration and disappointment— in the universe, in *himself*.

He's about to step away, about to disappear into the crowd and run home until his lungs give out, but the world finally gives him a break, if slight.

A group of girls shoulder their way towards them, and the one between his arms immediately scurries forward to greet them. They're taking her home. The designated driver shoots him an apologetic smile, ushering her friends towards the exit with practiced haste. Before they leave, though, the blond girl makes her way back towards him, a bit unsteady, and leans up on her tiptoes.

He seizes up again, limbs stiff as concrete, thinking she's going for a kiss again. But, instead, she just places a gentle peck on his cheek and gets close enough to whisper something.

George hears it this time.

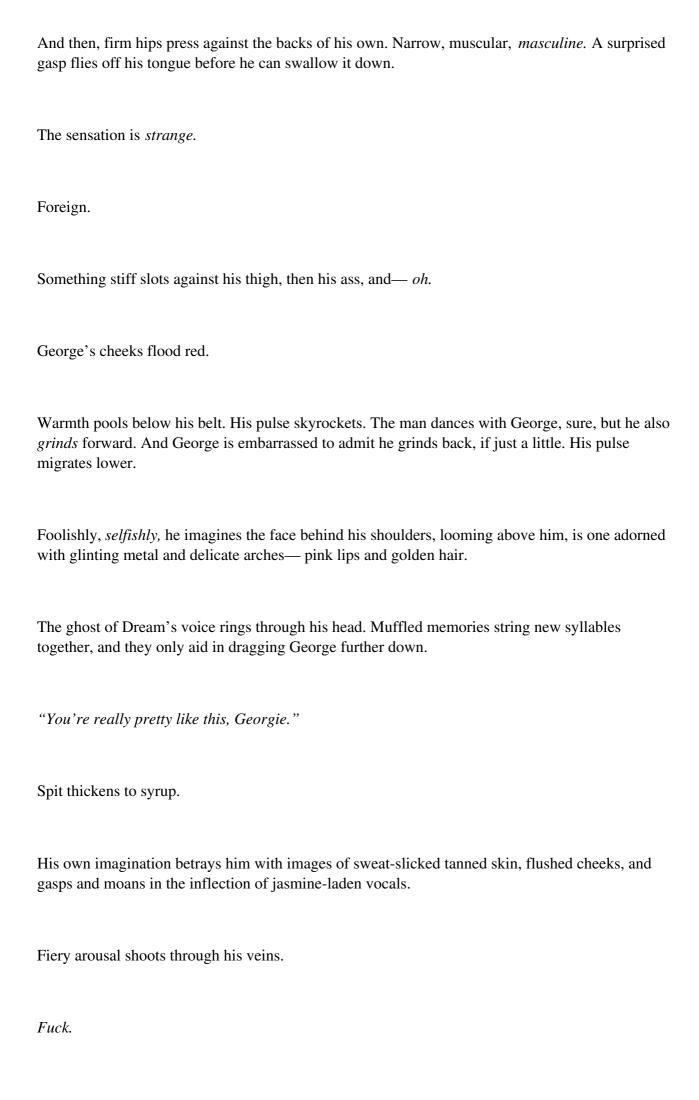


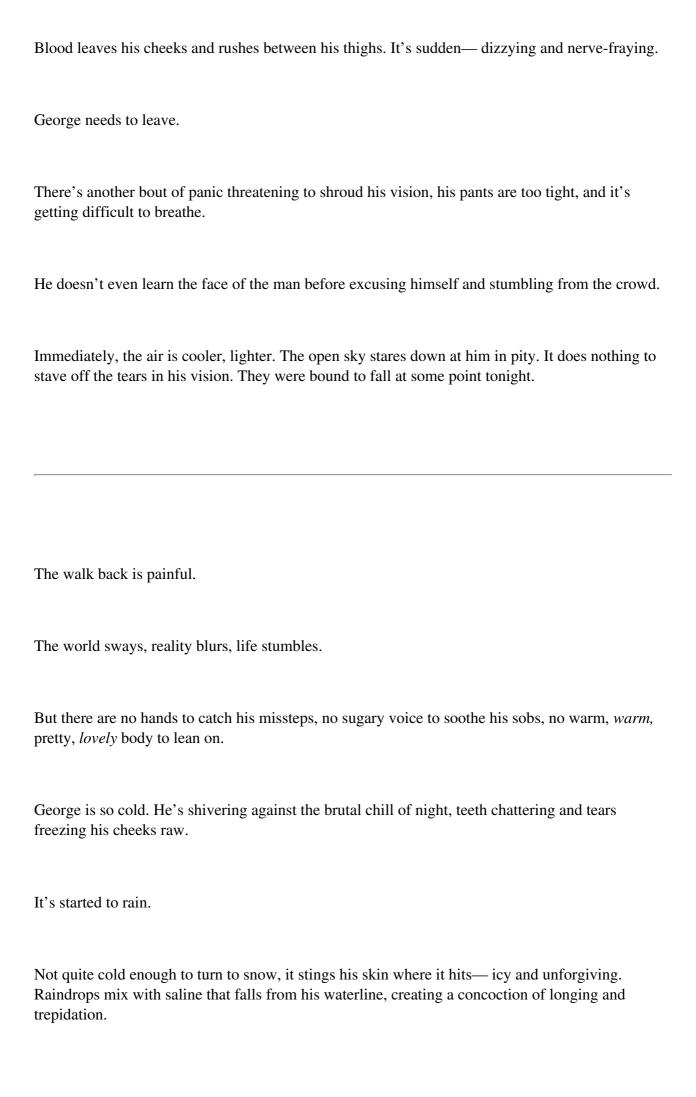
A proposition to dance with a man. Flames fan themselves into a wild frenzy at the pit of his stomach, fueled by gasoline anxiety and oxygen desire. He doesn't know this person. But the hands at his waist are lined with defined veins and sizable enough to substitute the man he's supposed to be forgetting. He frowns. They're lacking the cool press of rings and the gentleness of touch. But George is a little drunk. And he's tired. So, so tired. The man is waiting—hands hovering and giving George a clear out if he so chooses. He could step away, walk out the grandiose door, and forget tonight. His eyes squeeze shut, brain and body fighting. Curiosity laced with deathly desire fuels the beat of his heart. And, just like that, the claws win. George lets go— allows darkness to swallow him and breathes out relief when his screaming muscles are allowed to relent. The dance is nice. He's never been the one between broad shoulders before; the one with fingers in his skin and

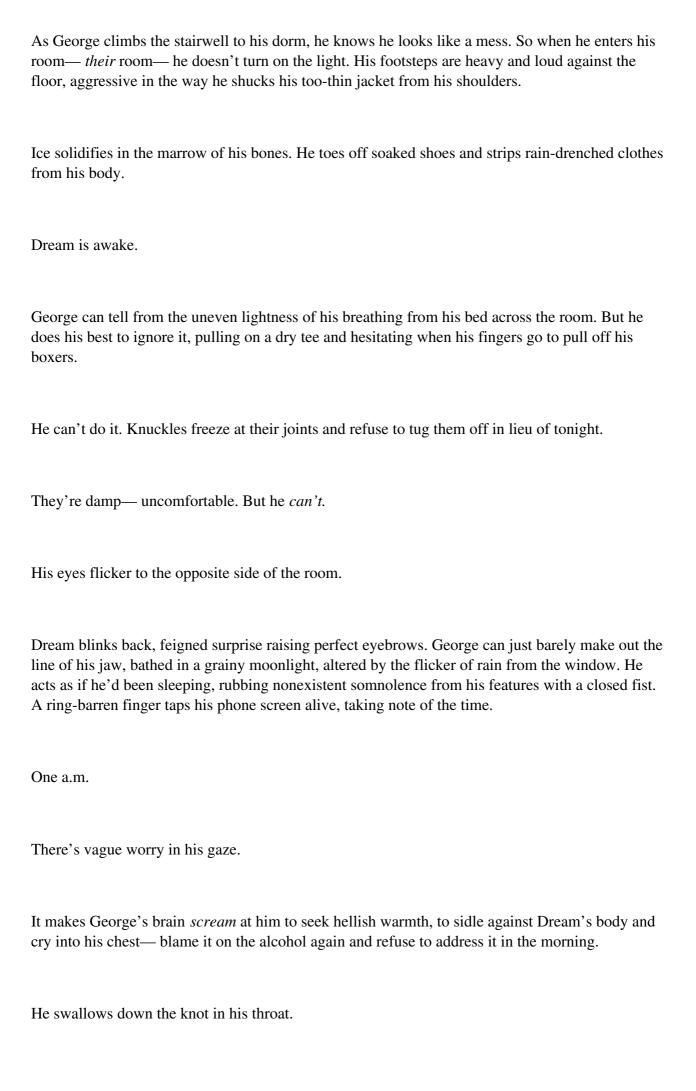
He's never been the one between broad shoulders before; the one with fingers in his skin and warmth at his back. He feels a slight flush of embarrassment when he doesn't quite know what to do with his hands. They simply latch onto the ones on his hips, just to grab onto *something*. If he imagines the heavy weight of metal along his knuckles, it's no one's business but his own.

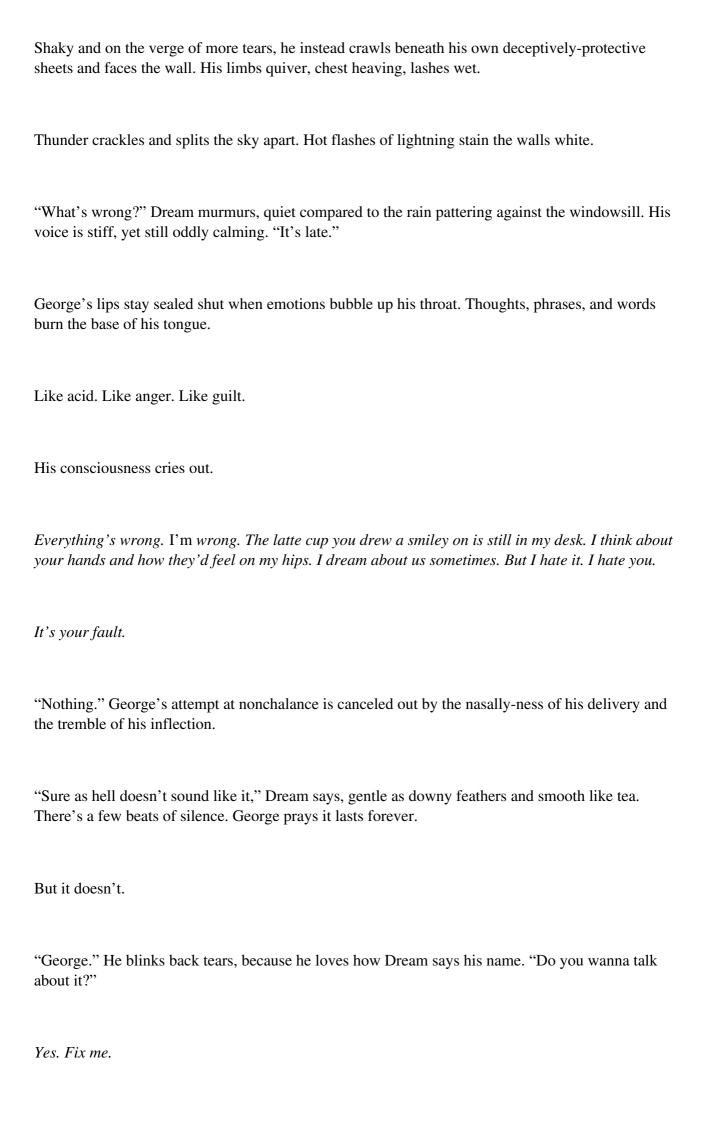
Despite all this, there's no thundering nervousness in his stomach, no alarm bells in his ears—nothing.

George sighs, relieved. He hates what this situation implies. But exhaustion is winning.



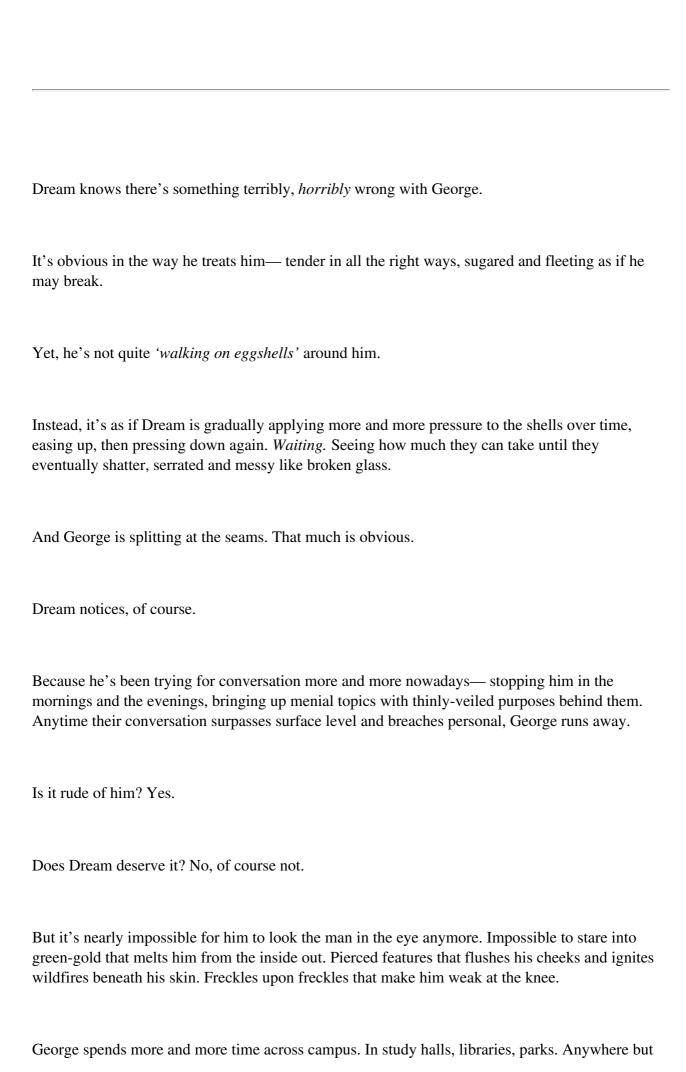






"No, I really, really don't, Dream. I just want to sleep," George chokes back. He knows he won't be able to sleep well. If he looked over his shoulder, he's sure Dream's eyes would be swimming with enticing concern, arms ready to console and voice dripping with solace. But if he doesn't, he can ignore it. He can painfully, shamefully, ignore it. Dream sighs, thick and heavy. George weighs him down. "Alright. Just— I'm here to talk if you need it." Stop talking. "Goodnight, George." He wishes Dream would stop saying his name. He wishes Dream would move out. He wishes Dream would just fucking leave. But George knows he'd chase him down, even if he did. Because there's something wrong with him. Something wrong with his head, his world, his tongue and eyes and hands. Another flash of lighting. He hears Dream's breathing stutter from across the room. A frown splits along the line of George's lips, violent as the storm outside, when he remembers. Dream's scared of thunder and lightning. "Goodnight," he eventually returns. Internally, he pleads for the tempest to soothe itself.

George falls asleep cold, yet surrounded by hell.



his dorm. He tries to sort his feelings and dilemmas out by himself—fruitlessly, *aimlessly*, grasping at straws. He knows he still needs someone to fix him. But he foolishly lets himself believe he's strong enough to do it on his own. Everytime he picks up a shard of himself, scattered about the ground, he cuts his fingers. Blood dots the pieces at his feet, dirtying what used to be his sanity. Red stains concrete and eggshells until they blur together. Red, red, red. Even worse, George figures out the blond girl he'd danced with a few days ago is in his communications class. Her name is something that starts with a D. The world just loves to crush him to dust. Her smile is apologetic when they meet eyes across the classroom. They talk, sober and calm, about meaningless things that never stray past platonic, and it ends with her number on his arm. Scribbled in permanent black ink, with a little smiley punctuated at the end. His heart drops the more he stares at it. It sinks into the tar pit in his core—swallowed by harsh unease. But he still lets her distract him, if just a bit. He forces himself to talk to her everyday, to ignore Dream in the morning and at night, to shrug off the guilt heavy upon his tongue and limbs.

The guilt is knowing he's leading her on. The guilt is seeing hurt flicker in green irises when he brushes past broad-shouldered sin.

He tries to retain every little detail about her. Memorizing the slopes of her face and the dimples at her cheeks until his brain feels full again. There's no metal in tongues, no freckles upon the bridge of her nose, no subtle lining of her eyes. It's perfect.

Wonderful.

There's no red about her features, either. Instead, she's baby blue and white—feathers and halos. No poisoned claws on her fingers or hellfire in her eyes. She's all rays of sun and fresh air.

George breathes it in. He's become too accustomed to nicotine and cannabis oxygen, and, like an addict, his instincts cry out for him to crawl back.

But he's here right now, in a classroom with her—head in the clouds, body stuffed with excuses and gap-filling holiness. The number she'd written on his forearm is faded, but not completely gone, yet. He covers it up with long sleeves, like it's some sort of thing he's ashamed of.

The class is over sooner than later. She's getting up and leaving, flashing pearly white teeth and blunt canines at him before stepping away.

Just like that, George's temporary distraction is gone.

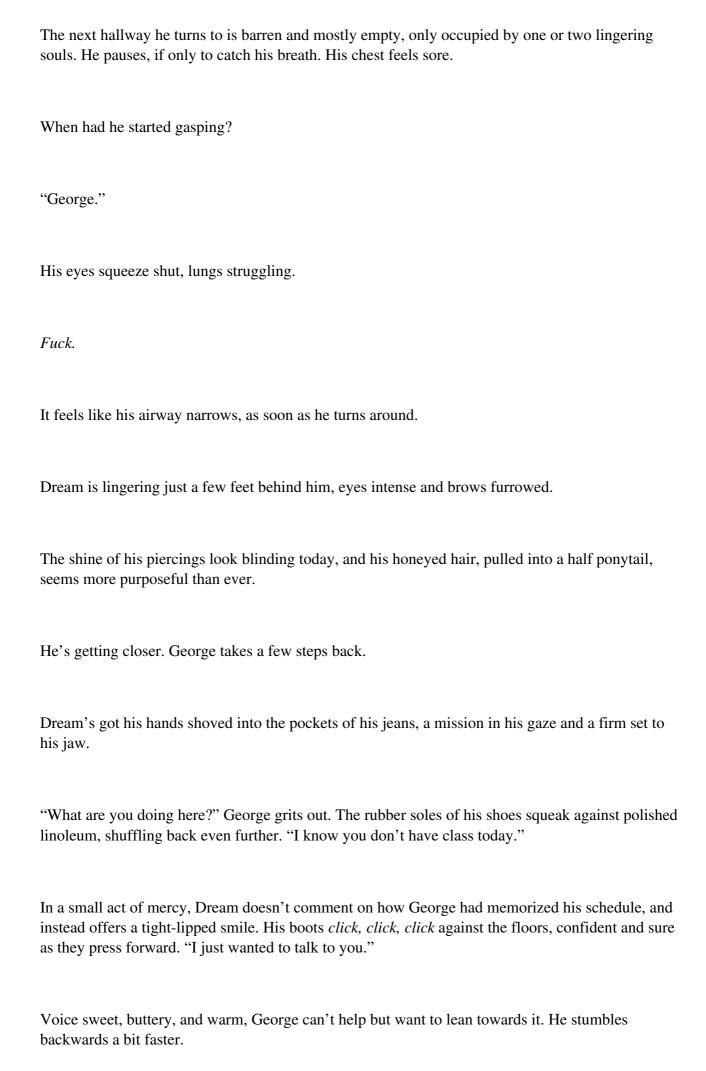
He sighs, and it immediately feels like boulders are balancing upon his shoulders again. Each folder and notebook is packed away in drone-like fashion, lips drawn into a tired frown. He's thinking way too much today. He can't recall a single thing she'd told him, despite telling himself he'd shove his brain full of her until he forgets everything else.

George sighs, just once, and steps out of the classroom. Students push past him in the hallway. Some lingering, some talking, some sitting against walls.

One of them is staring right at him.

He can feel a set of eyes boiling the surface of his skin, but he can't seem to find its owner. It's like a sick sixth sense, as he walks corridor to corridor—the hairs at the back of his neck standing pin-straight and alert.

Someone's following him.





Doe eyes, trembling, seek the intense emerald above him.	
"Are you ready to talk with me now, or are you gonna run away again?" Dream says. It's hard more than a whisper, with how close they are.	ily
Regret flashes hot in George's chest. There's no blond girl to distract him, no corner to escape there's no heaven in hell.	e to:
Resigned, he chooses to not say anything. He fears his voice may crack along with the rest of	him.
But Dream knows what it means. So he gives a firm nod, and says, "Good." His hands leave to perch on George's shoulders, but they give him little time to relax. Because then, both palms a flat on the bricked wall beside his head, framing him—boxing him in and plunging George's world a shade darker in shadow.	are
He bites his cheek, head plastered to the solidness behind him. It's as if he's reprimanding hin for the involuntary blush creeping up his neck.	nself
"What are you—"	
"Just—just shut up, for a second," Dream cuts him off. There's a newfound grit to his voice, and serious, that makes George's dry up. "I'm gonna speak my mind for a bit, and you're gon pretty and listen, okay?"	
George doesn't think he <i>can</i> speak anymore, even if he wanted to. As soon as the word ' <i>pretty</i> flies from scarlet lips, his entire body goes numb.	ν'
Pretty. Pretty boys. Pretty, pretty—	
He musters a small nod back.	
"George, I—" Dream stutters, and, suddenly, he looks so, <i>so</i> distraught. Brows drawn, eyes pooling with concern. "I'm really fucking worried about you."	

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If George's heart had the ability to sink even further, it would've dropped below the earth's surface by now.

"And I know you're confused, right now. I *get* it, alright? But—I don't know how much more of yourself you're going to destroy before you let me help you." Dream's words are so brutally *honest*. A pair of butterfly wings flutter in George's stomach. "Believe it or not, I can't read your mind, George. I just need you to talk to me, *please*."

The tension in George's muscles multiplies at the thought of spilling his turmoil to the man who caused it. He wills his mind to go blank. Because if it's blank, he doesn't have to *worry* or *think* or *say* anything.

So his lips stay sealed shut. He lets his hands do the talking, instead. They rise from his sides—deep, angry crescents embedded into his palms from where his nails had carved their name. Palms splay on Dream's chest, pointedly ignoring how every nerve there hums with electricity.

Dream is warm.

George's heart stutters.

And he shoves.

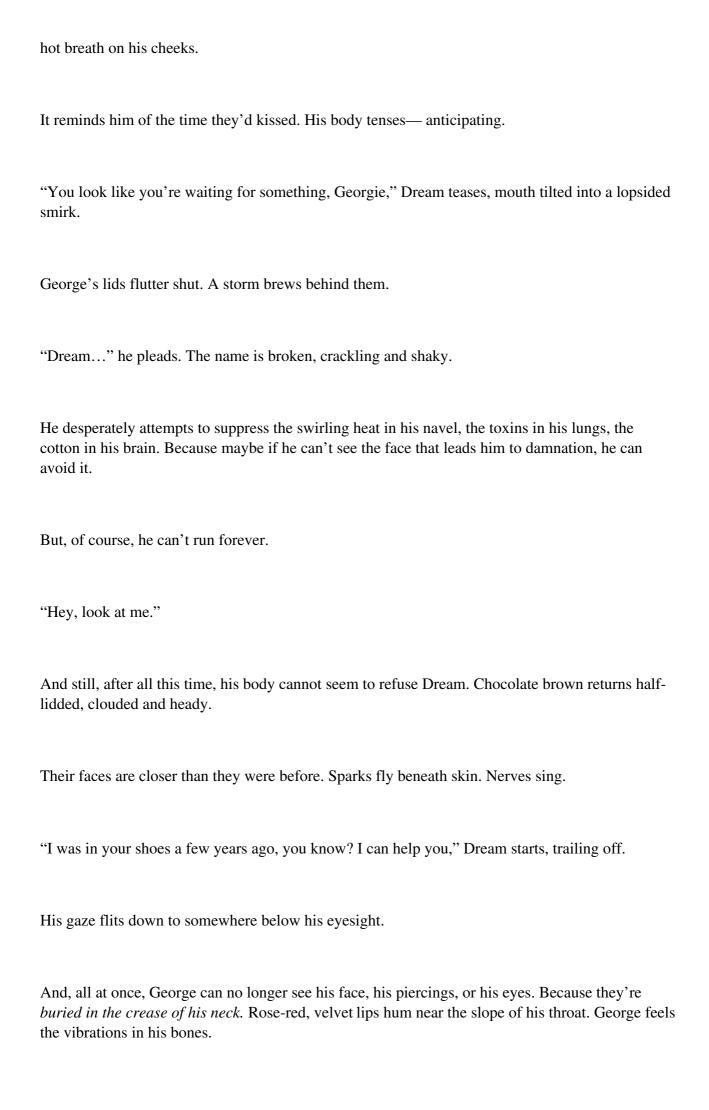
The force hardly moves him. The only reaction is a huff of breath, spilling sharply from Dream's nose.

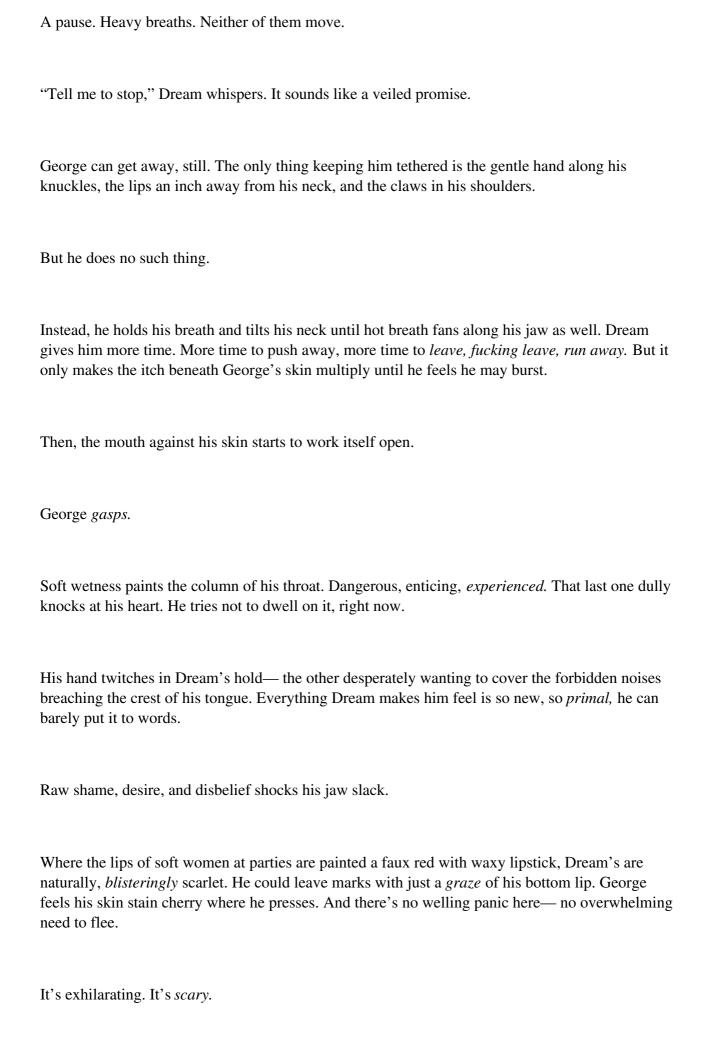
George's jaw flexes. "I don't want to talk to you, Dream."

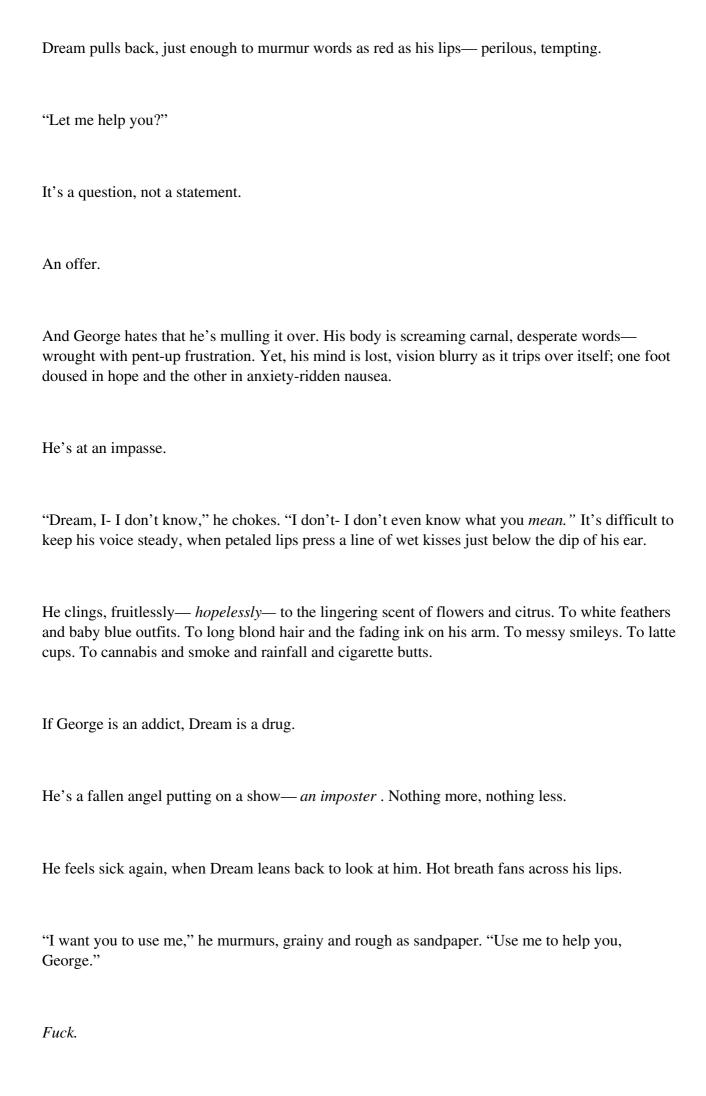
"I know," he admits, resolved and firm.

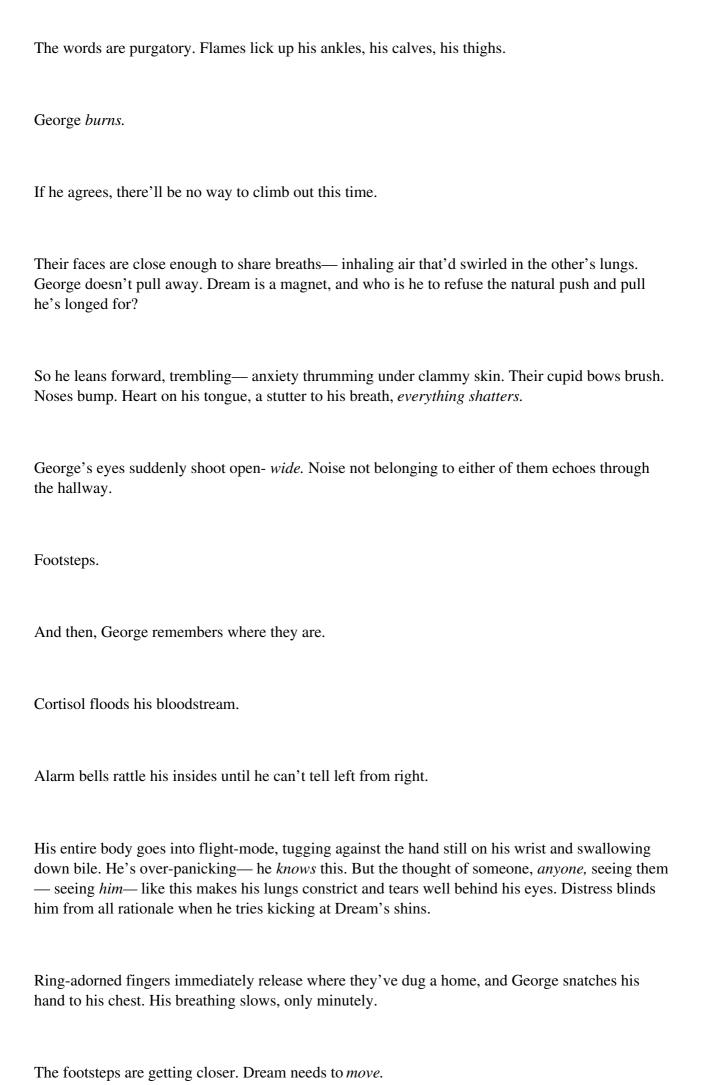
Movement startles George out of his staring contest. He can do nothing but swallow, hard, as











"Dream, get away from me! Please!" he whisper-yells, hysteria pumping electricity through the fibers of his muscles. He feels like a live wire, ends splitting.

It's more out of instinct than anything, when he shoves Dream aside and puts distance between their bodies. His arms cross his chest, hugging himself close as if trying to disappear. He doesn't think he's ever had less control of his body than he has around Dream.

The man makes his most barebones instincts emerge— ones he's never experienced before. Thrilling, yet utterly *terrifying*.

Dream hovers a few feet away to keep the distance, hands suspended in the air, a frown pulling his lips earthwards. George calms himself, schooling his breathing just as heeled boots round the corner. A student passes, glued to her phone. There's a brief second where she looks up to spare them a mere glance. Curiously, and with sickness in his stomach, George watches as recognition flickers in her eyes when they lock with Dream's.

Shock paints his features when she sends a smile and a wave and a *wink*. But then, her pace continues. Like nothing happened.

The footsteps come and go, and Dream starts twirling his rings over and over—fidgeting, restless.

Click, click, click, clickclickclick—

The sound of Dream's piercing against his teeth is like silverware on ceramic. It's rapid, and it makes George's blood *boil*. Any sort of anxiety evaporates; it's replaced by confusing frustration that climbs out of his mouth before he can stop it.

Why is he so fucking angry right now?

"Do you know her?" George mutters, unintentionally spiteful. The question comes out embarrassingly green-tinted.

Dream, forever collected, tramples down his physical habits, shoving fists into his pockets and ceasing his relentless clicking. "And if I do? Why should it matter?"



There's a long stretch of silence, then.
George's fingers dig into his biceps, hard enough to bruise. He's broken all over- beaten down time and time again, with shattered insides and drained muscles to show for it.
Tired. Exhausted.
He's done running from what his body seeks.
Closure. He wants closure.
Lips pursed, he lets himself breathe out his answer, even though he doesn't entirely know what he's agreeing to.
"Okay."
Their room is cold today.
Maybe it's because Dream's been gone since eight this morning, taking all the heat with him.
He'd returned only fifteen minutes ago, clock striking nine at night. It was confusing how fast he'd sped in and out of the dorm; he'd hardly spared George a <i>glance</i> . Heavy steps, the snatch of a towel, a slam of the door, and he was gone again. Hardly enough time for George to speak, to ask, to <i>look</i> .
So now, he's alone— confused again.
All George knows is that there's gooseflesh on his arms and a chill to the air, kissing his cheeks

pink and nipping at his fingertips.

He's convinced their heating system must be broken, with how cold he gets sometimes.

It doesn't help that he's been on edge for the past two days. There's this sort of buzz beneath his skin whenever Dream brushes past him lately— limbs pulled taut with anticipation and nerves.

Just like with the kiss, Dream is waiting.

Waiting for George's queue, for his seams to burst and initiate whatever the hell it is he agreed to back in that hallway.

Tension thick as cigarette tar taints wherever Dream walks. He infects the very ground his soles touch— every particle of air and every speck of dust. And George is forced to breathe it in.

It's almost as if Dream is pressing twice as hard on him nowadays.

His hands linger longer than they should on George's waist as he passes by, his nose stud is abandoned for a small ring, his eyes glimmer with something like seduction. But it's a different sort of seduction than what he's used to.

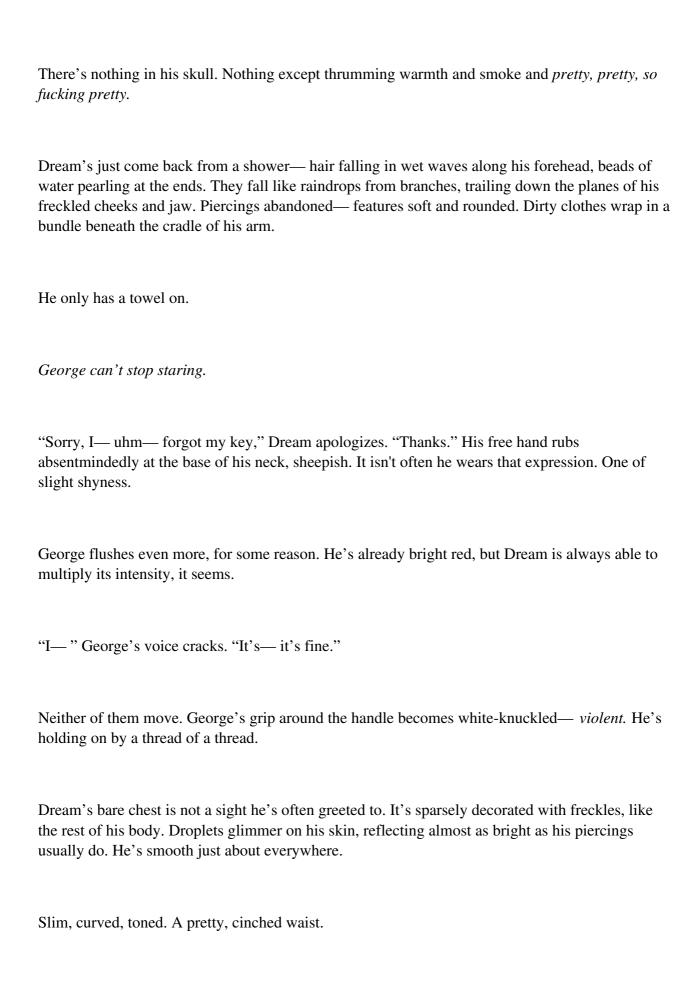
Dream's is saturated, warm, and gentle, somehow. Light. Non-forceful. Patient.

A small part of George laments his own inability to muster confidence like he did when he asked for a kiss. It's more difficult, this time around. Because he doesn't know exactly what he's supposed to be asking for.

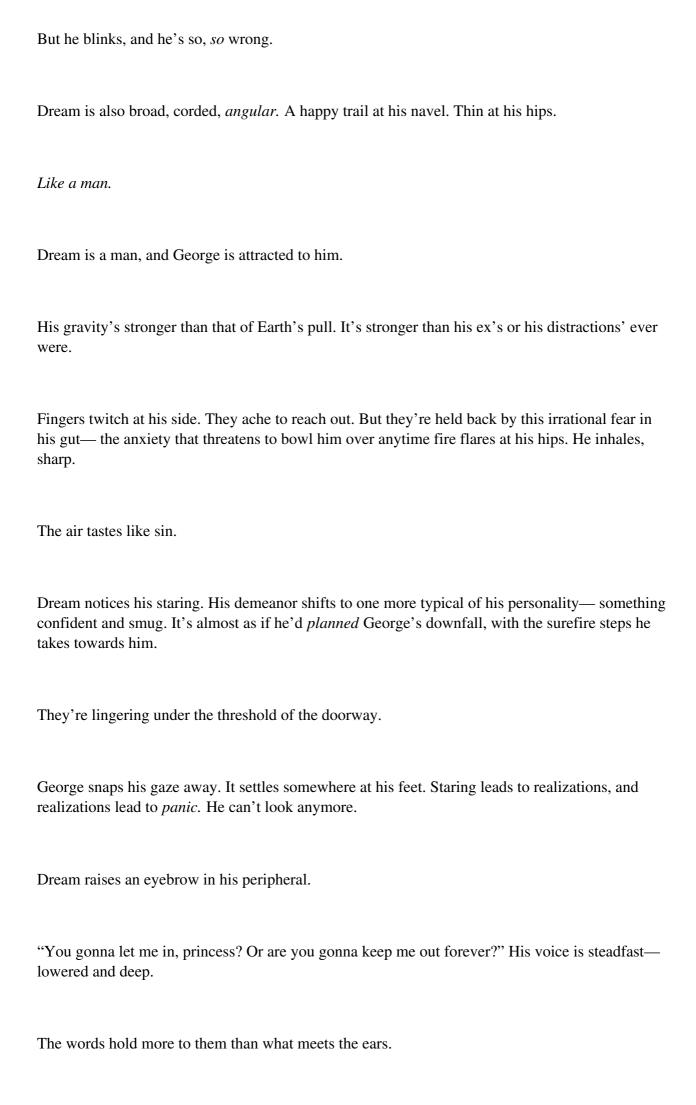
So they've instead let the tension multiply— let it brew and ferment until the air inside the dorm feels stifling.

The ink stained on his arm— evidence of his futile distraction— has faded almost entirely. Just a faint outline of the smiley remains. His finger pads trace along its edge, as if he can return its saturation out of sheer will. But, just like George's imitation feathers and feigned white robes, it continues to disintegrate.

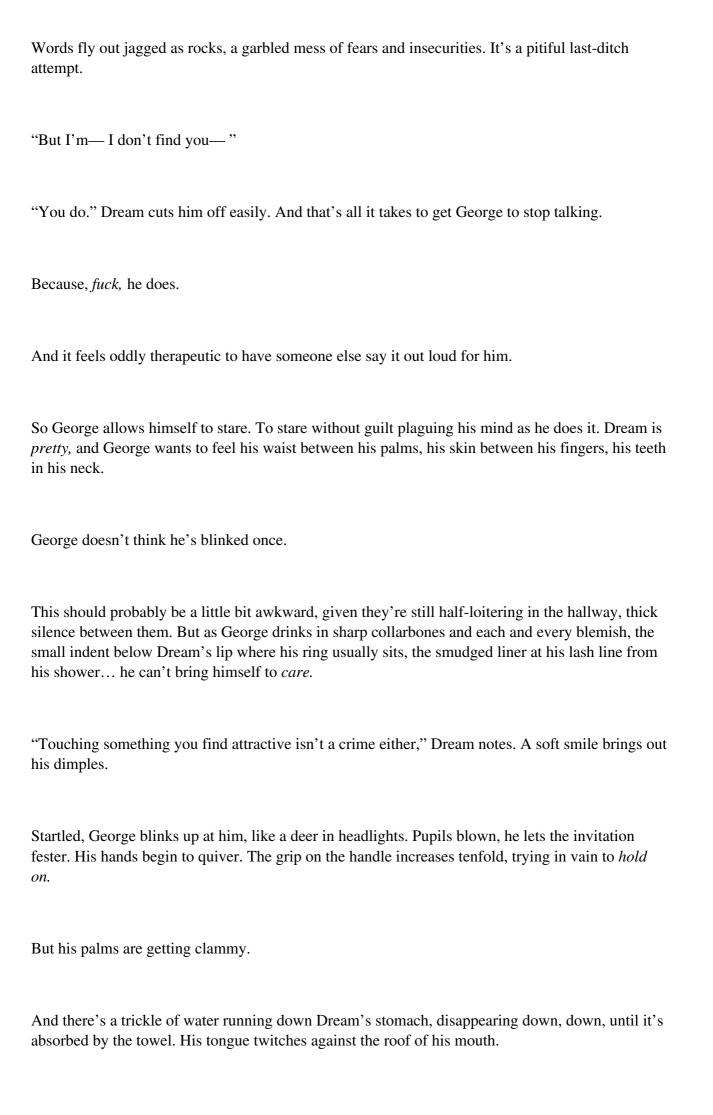
Because that sort of thing doesn't work for him.
He's learned that the hard way.
His hands ache to thumb across the doodle on the cup in his desk, but, with great difficulty, he refrains. It's still embarrassing to think about, anyway. The cardboard secret makes him feel pathetic, but it also makes him feel like he's <i>melting</i> .
He's not sure which is worse.
George nearly jumps out of his skin when a knock sounds from the door. Knuckles rap across the wood a few times more, confirming he hadn't imagined the noise amongst his rapid thoughts.
Socked feet hit the floor.
He pads past crowded shelves and a dusty guitar case, past an unclean sink and a schedule pinned to the cork board on the wall. A stray sock from Dream at his feet, a shared coat rack to his right. Something sugared fills his chest.
Sometimes George forgets how domestic their living situation is.
Lithe fingers wrap around the handle of the door. It feels blisteringly warm against the numbness of his palm.
George doesn't catch the symbolism.
The door swings open.
And
He fucking short circuits.

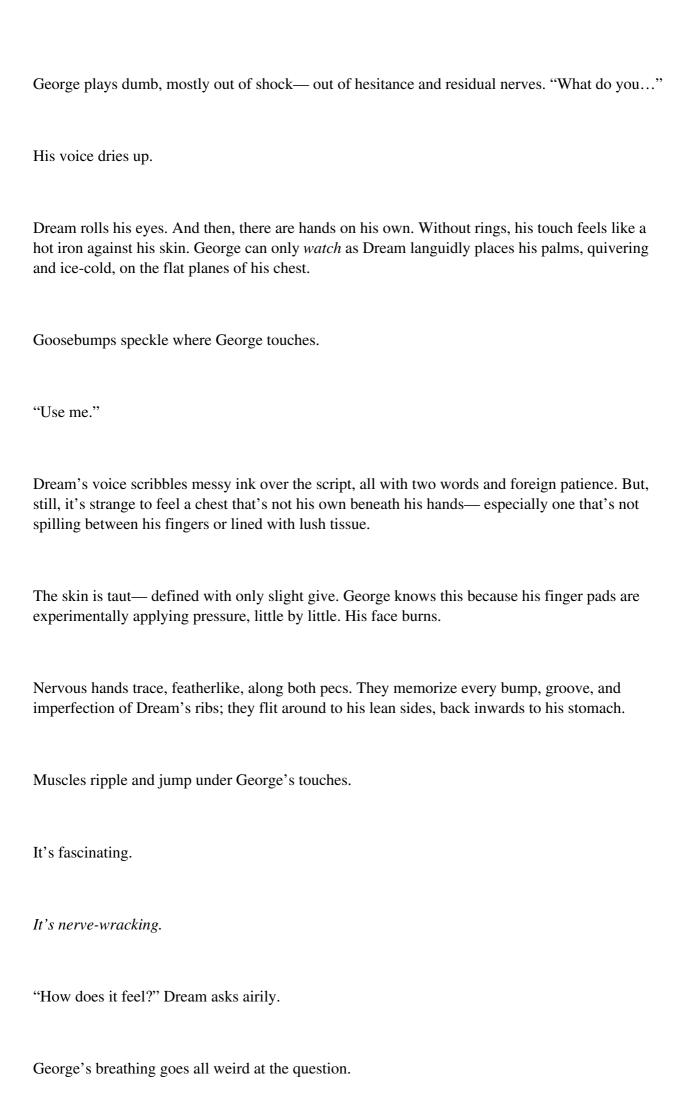


Like a girl.

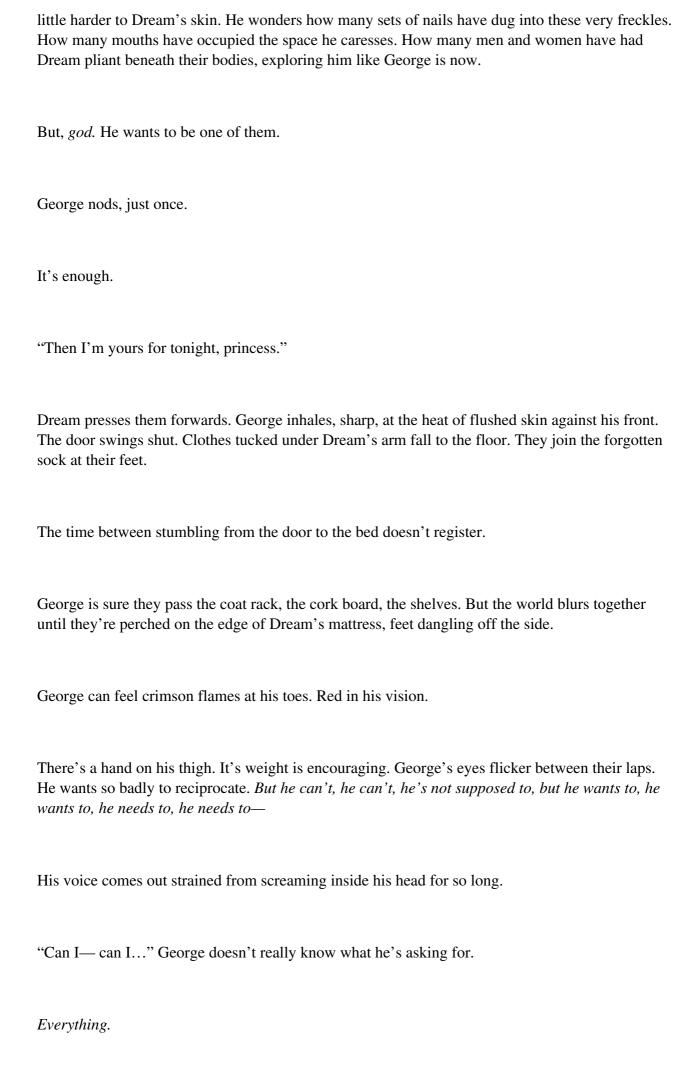


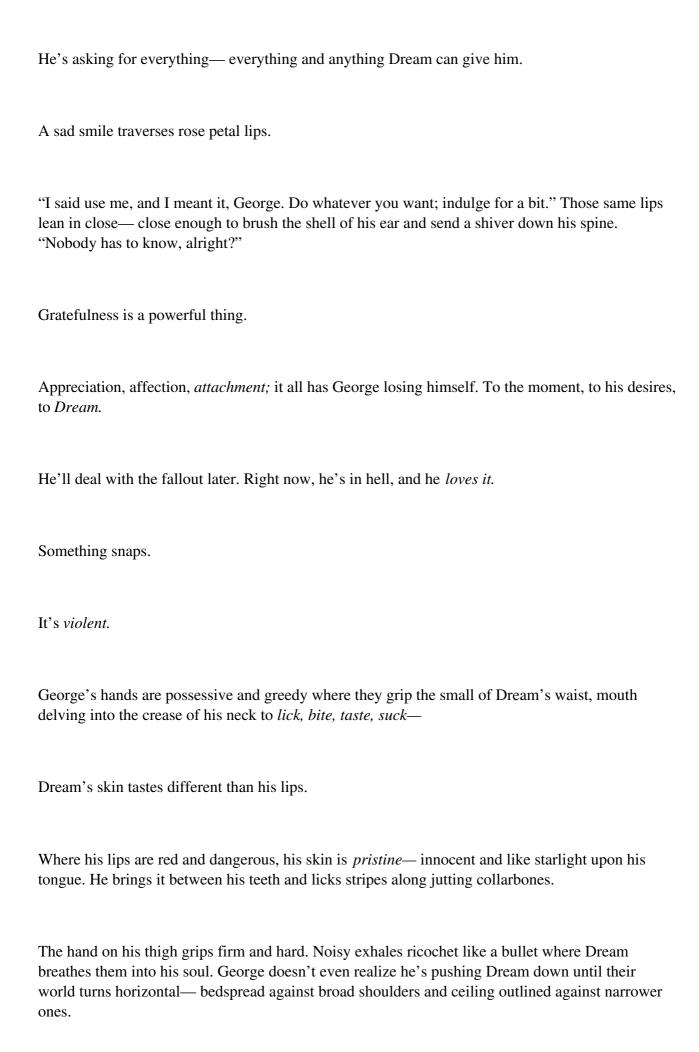
But George just bites his lip, still unable to look Dream in the eye. It's a product of his weakness. Of his crumbling foundation. Of the flames licking up his spine and threatening to consume him whole.
It feels <i>wrong</i> to look at a man in such a way. To appreciate his dips and curves and impurities like he would a woman's— to imagine what each would feel like beneath his palms, his touch, his <i>tongue</i> .
A noise leaves the clutches of his chest.
"Look at me." Dream's voice is near enough to reverberate inside his head.
Like a weak, lost puppy, George's eyes immediately fall back upon him. They blink rapidly, and refuse to delve below his collarbones.
The exhale that caresses the apple of George's cheek is soft, when Dream goes to speak again. "You're allowed to stare, Georgie. It's not a crime to appreciate something you find attractive, you know?" he murmurs.
Forceful truth is hard to hear, but even harder to deliver. The carefully crafted syllables churn heat in George's core.
Molten gold pools south.
Instinctual retorts bubble up. They're a result of what's been ingrained into his soul for his entire life—words, lessons, and <i>rules</i> written like a script alongside his rationale. He knows he thinks Dream is attractive. But George is a man. <i>Dream</i> is a man.
And the script doesn't want to be rewritten.
He can't say it out loud.

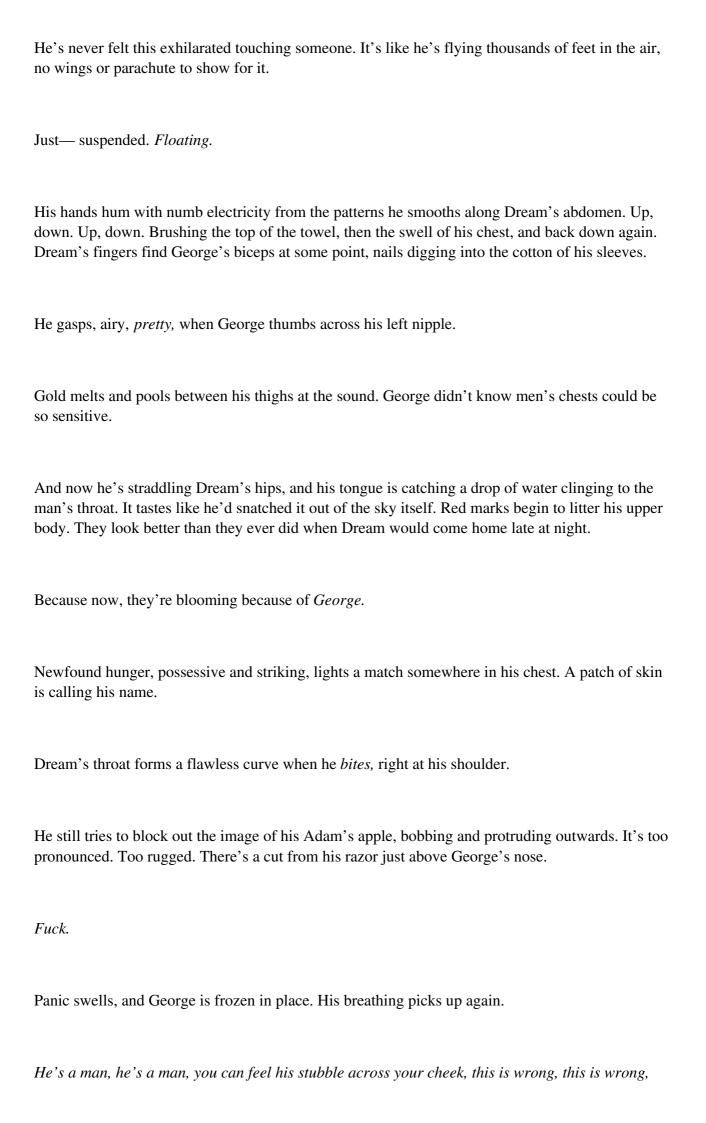












his chest is flat, there's a dick against your thigh, run, leave, what are you fucking doing—

"George, you're shaking," Dream murmurs. His hands are suddenly on his cheeks, and they're looking at each other. Overwhelmed tears wet his lashes and trickle down Dream's thumbs. They're sudden, but Dream doesn't look surprised. "Do you wanna stop?"

George doesn't think before shaking his head. He wants this so badly.

"Dream," he whispers, broken. He doesn't know why he says it.

Gentle fingertips wipe away saline shame, caressing the apex of his cheeks. George is *trembling* when he sits up a bit and drifts his hands down, down—further than they'd gone before. His fingers trail along the knot of the towel, loosened by George's weight.

He knows what's under it. The knowledge doesn't make it any easier.

Breathing is difficult, during this. But Dream is there to calm him down, to mutter gentle praises and soothe his stuttering ribs. A hand remains on his cheek while the other brushes along his knee, rubbing kind circles into his still-clothed skin.

It takes a single finger to undo the knot.

Threadbare cloth slides open. It pools about Dream's hips—framing him against dark sheets.

A soft groan kisses George's ears.

Dream turns red easily. His flush spreads down his chest and past his hips. George's mouth dries up as his eyes chase it between his thighs.

And he decides then that pretending Dream was ever anything but a man was the dumbest fucking excuse he ever had.

Because Dream is worked up—breathing hard with marks along his throat and need in his eyes.

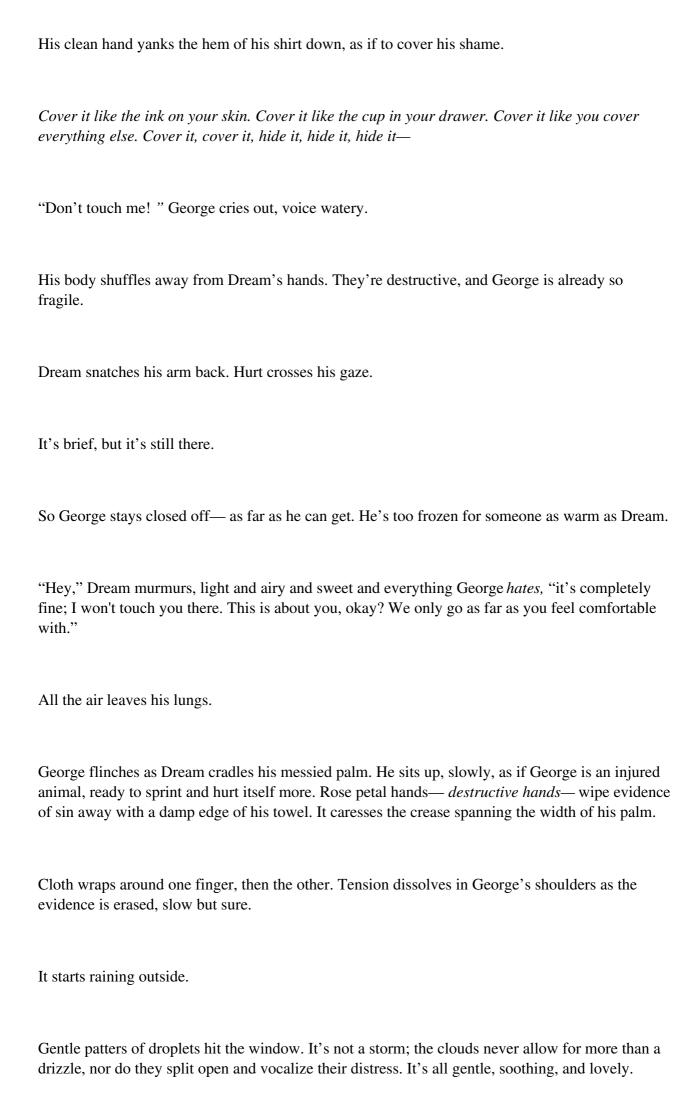


It all falls apart from there.
Because George is an addict, and he craves <i>Dream</i> , <i>Dream</i> , <i>Dream</i> . His noises, his tremors, his gasps.
Dream's length is foreign beneath his fingers, but they wrap about him all the same. The skin there is hellfire—velvety and thrumming with pounding blood and warmth.
Where women are soft all over, Dream is rigid. Where women moan high-pitched and beautiful, Dream moans low and pretty.
So different, yet so right.
George picks up his pace, just to watch Dream's face go slack in pleasure, jaw dropping open to accommodate a string of whines and groans. George's hand twitches when slick warmth pools down his knuckles. He can't help but break Dream's advice, glancing down between their bodies.
Oh, god.
"Fuck"
The swear slips from the hollow solitude of his chest.
Because Dream is <i>dripping</i> over his fingers.
It glistens off the backs of his knuckles, slicking the movement of his palm against beating flesh. The muscles at Dream's navel twitch and flex, cock jumping beneath his touch.
It's so new.
Exciting. Intimidating. George doesn't know anymore.



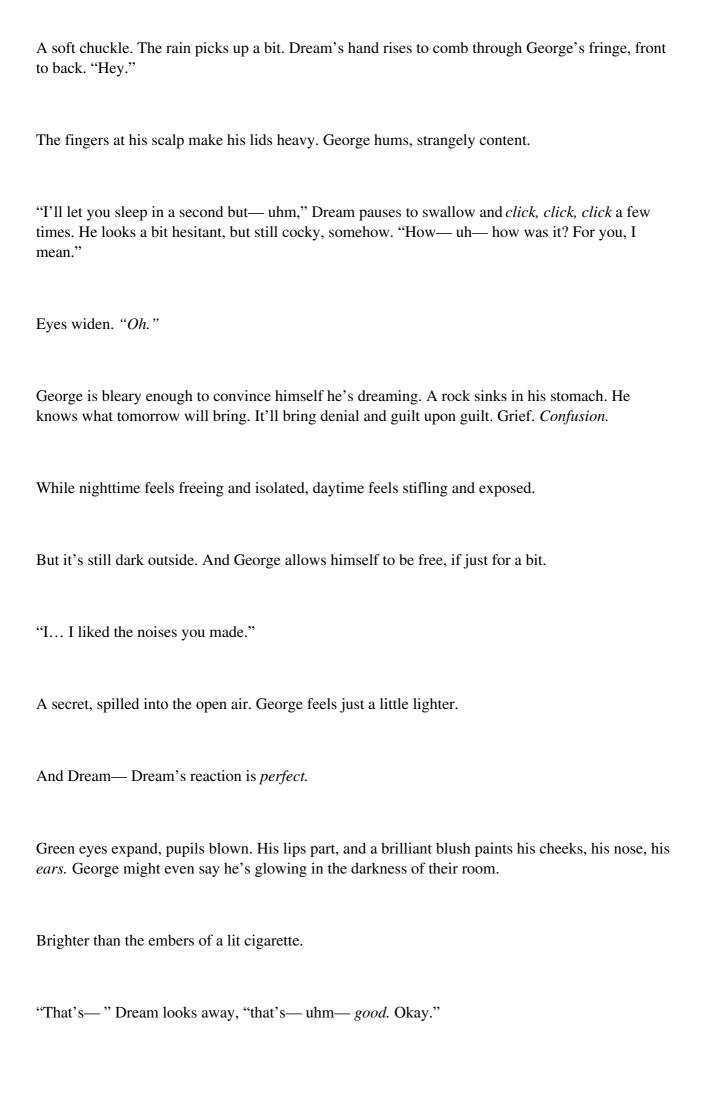


Sin dirties his hand and Dream's chest.
Unpracticed fingers work him through it, shakily stroking until he fears it may be too much.
Heady gasps eventually slow. Fingers uncurl; claws sink until they hit bone. They're permanent, now. He might learn to live with it, yet.
Dream's hair, still damp from his shower, splays around his head like a thorned crown. It looks ethereal enough to be a halo.
Endorphins and adrenaline flee George's system. And then, everything's <i>empty</i> .
Awkward. Tense.
George stiffens.
What the fuck did they just do?
Stickiness coats his left hand. It feels like tar. His sweats are still tight. Nausea rises, stinging his eyes and throat.
He supposes the fallout had to start at some point.
Then, there's a hand creeping up his thigh, and Dream is speaking. "Do you want me to?" He gestures vaguely to where he's straining.
Alarm bells that'd been quiet for <i>so long</i> return with dreadful forcefulness. He feels <i>humiliated</i> by having it pointed out. By Dream reminding him how <i>painfully</i> , <i>horribly</i> hard he is.
All because of a <i>man</i> . Because of masculine moans and flat chests and pierced tongues and <i>Dream</i> .



George sighs, pliant under skilled hands. "Let me get cleaned up, then I'll be right back, okay?" Dream's voice practically melds with the sound of rain. It's then that George remembers he's still in his lap. Heat creeps up his neck. He gives a small nod before shuffling off freckled thighs. "Thank you," he says with a honeyed smile, swinging long, long legs over the edge of the bed. George looks away while he grabs clothes and leaves to change. It still feels wrong to stare. His fist clenches around Dream's comforter, steadying himself as he lowers himself to the floor. There's a flash of shame when his legs shake. *Is he really that worked up?* His sweats are still tight, but not as uncomfortable as they were before. Walking is still a bit of a chore—knees knocking and feet dragging. It's a miracle he makes it into his bed without tripping. He lays down, facing Dream's side of the room. Exhaustion is suddenly heavy in his bones. He didn't know he'd been tense at each of his joints until now. When Dream comes back, he's in boxers and an oversized hoodie. It swallows the tips of his fingers and hangs off his frame, down to mid-thigh. George bites his cheek at the sight. There's no time to think before smoke curls around his windpipe. Dream is right in front of him, eyes melted around the edges and swimming with something warmer than usual.

"Hi," George croaks out.



George smiles, just slightly.
He feels warm.
The last thing he sees in clarity is Dream leaning forward, fingers pressing his bangs flat to the top of his head.
Rose petals.
They stain a spot on his forehead, just below his widow's peak. He foolishly wishes they would stain his lips, too.
The rain is steady and calming against the windowsill. It promises wet pavement and puddles in the morning.
Sodden leaves stuck to concrete.
Humidity in lungs.
George falls asleep, but he dreads tomorrow.

Needs and Wants

Chapter Summary

He knows he can't do this anymore.

Can't pretend like he doesn't want Dream in every way he can't have him. Can't listen to himself *deny* and *reason* and *scream* anymore.

Last night made things worse.

Because all George can see when he blinks is *Dream*, *Dream*, *Dream*, *Dream*. Dream panting and gasping. Dream bare and splayed under him. Dream in his palm. Dream between his teeth. On his tongue, in his lungs, dripping over his fingers.

Everything is fucked. Everything is wrong.

George figures things out.

Chapter Notes

Hi again!

Wow, it has been a little while since I uploaded, but I swear it wasn't intentional. I've been unbelievably busy, but I hope you all didn't think I abandoned this project:) I'm going to see this through until the end for sure; life just hasn't given me a break. Please enjoy this chapter! I put a lot into it and, as always, I'm very excited to share it with you all.

The song used during this chapter is *If I Get High* by Nothing But Thieves. Yes, I used another NBT song, sue me. You can listen to the original or the second version; I think both do a good job at setting the tone.

Warnings for this chapter:

TW: Smoking, drug use, explicit sexual content, minor panic attacks, vomit mention

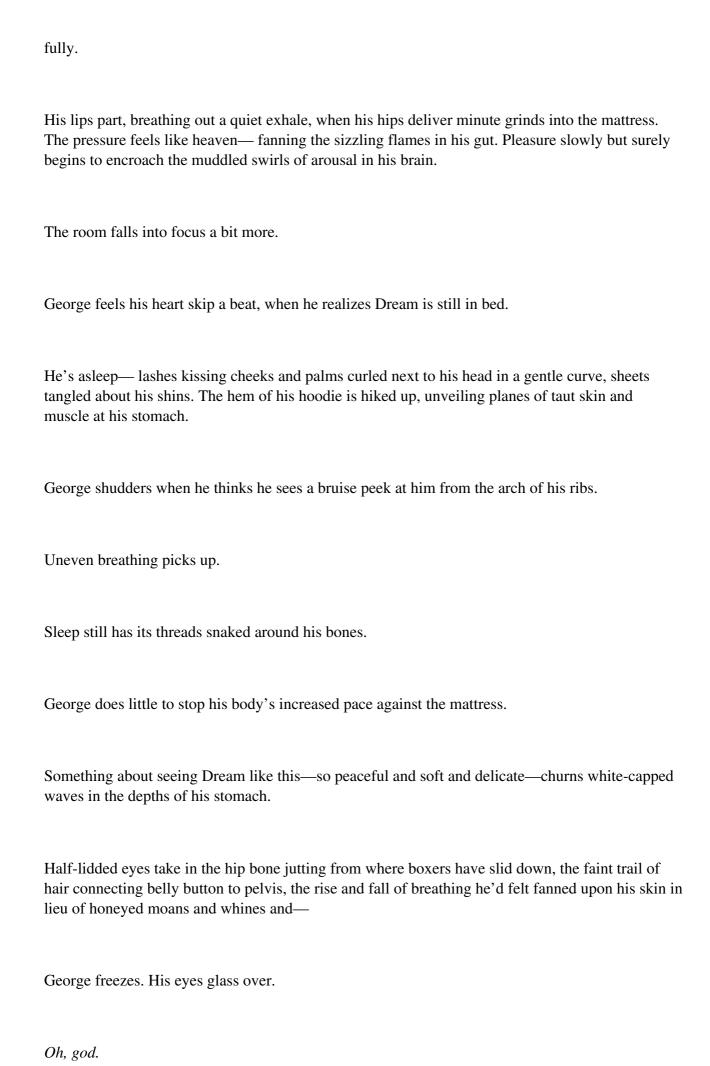
I think that should be all. Please stick this chapter through:) I swear there is a reason for everything! <3

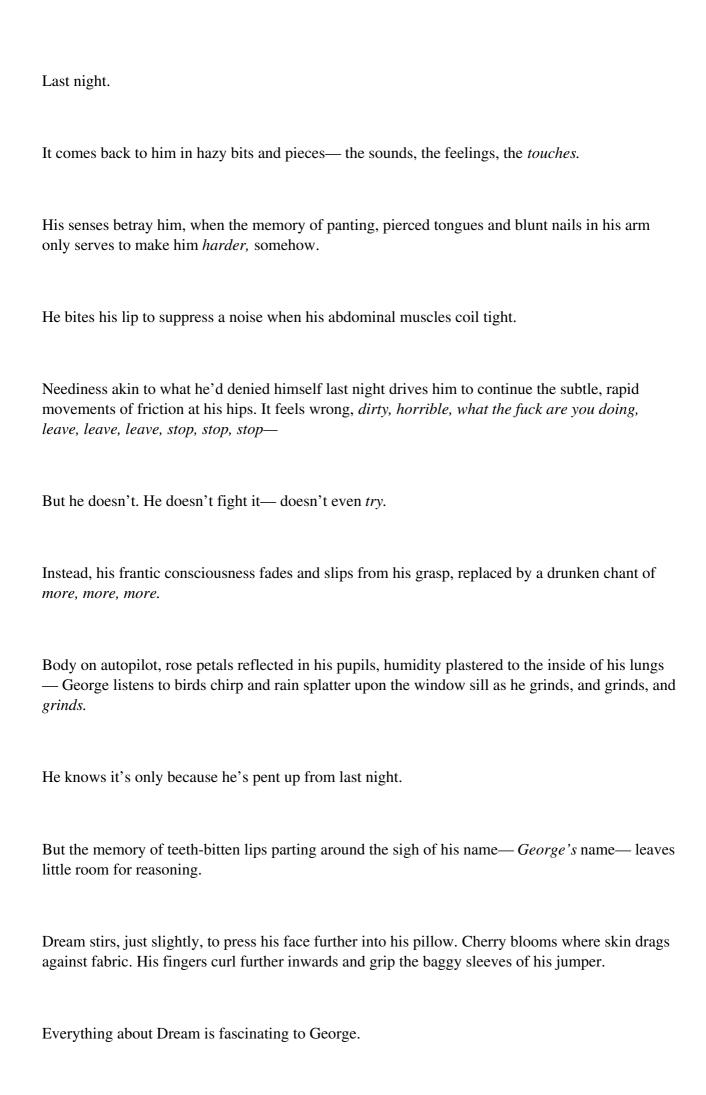
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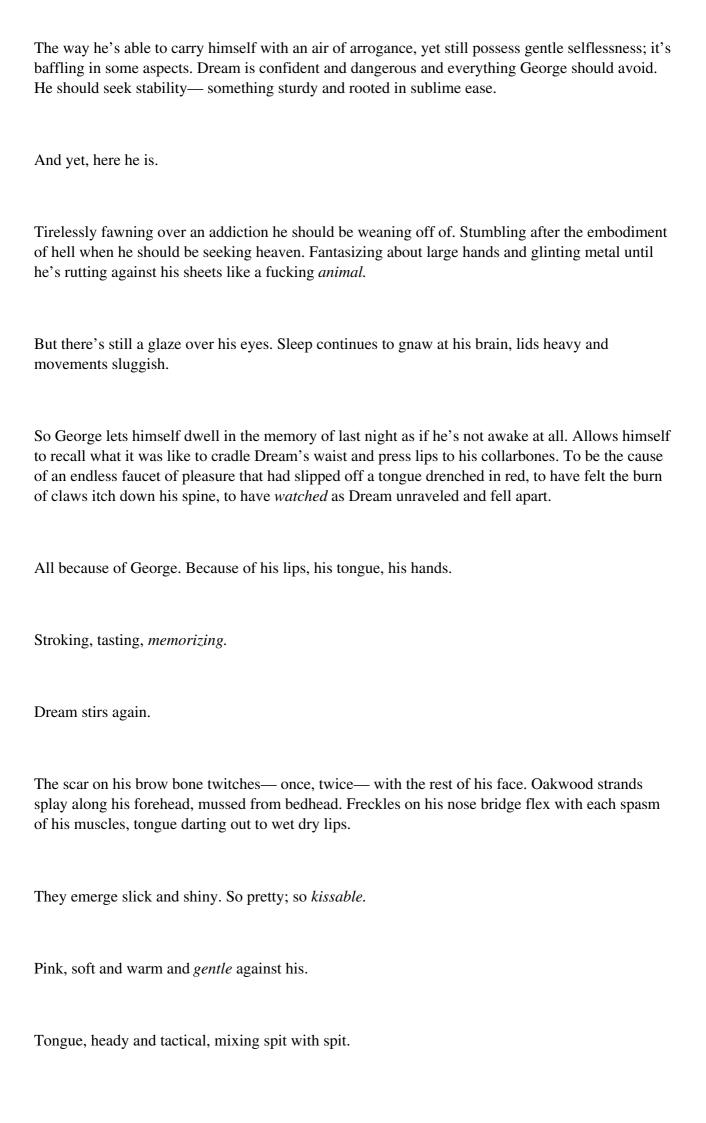
If Dream and/or George ever decide they're no longer comfortable with nsfw/shipping, this fic will be immediately taken down.

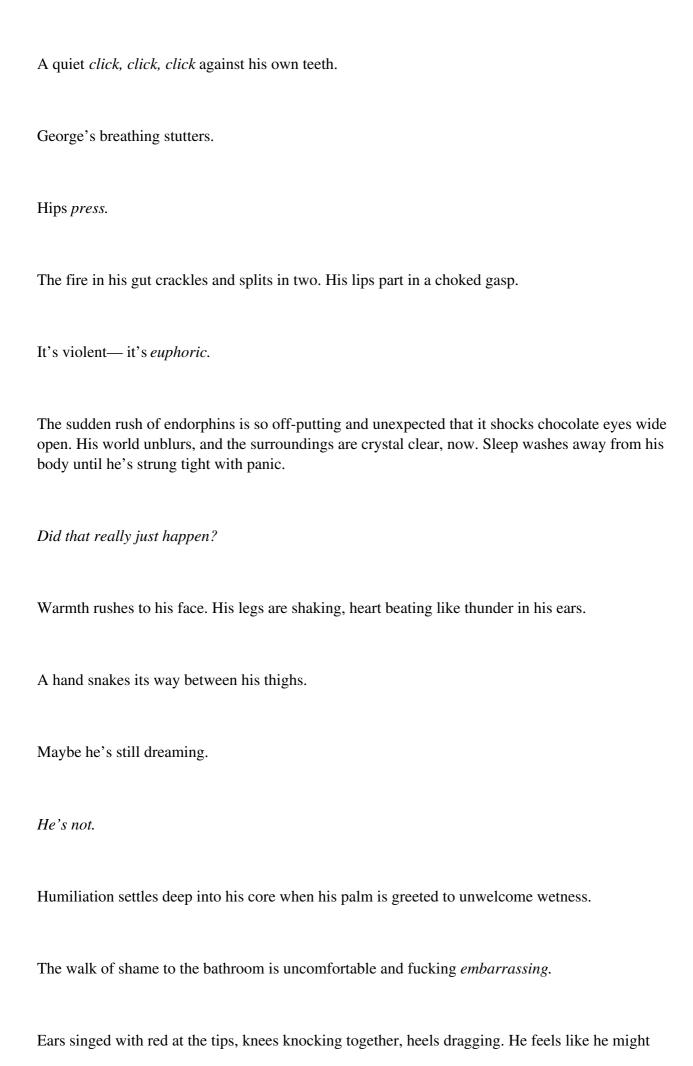
George awakes to the sound of trickling water.
Humidity settles in his lungs and upon his limbs. The tongue against the roof of his mouth feels dry. He aches to lap up the beads of water trailing down the window pane as they <i>plink</i> against fogged glass.
Phantom wetness coats his taste buds when he swallows, as if he's still dreaming.
He shifts.
Ah. His mouth etches into a taut line.
George is hard.
Again.
It's not nearly as surprising as it used to be, this time around.
So he just sighs, and rolls onto his stomach. Pillow against cheek. Sheets curled in fingers. His comforter had been kicked off late last night— pooled in a heap on the floor below.
The skin around his eyes feels crusted and heavy, raw from wiped-away tears and restless tossing and turning. He's halfway between sleep and consciousness, when he blinks open his eyes— misty and fuzzed at the corners.
Dreary slats of sun drench the carpet a dull warm color. Specks of dust and debris in the air shimmer where the light falls, and George admires the sight for a few seconds.

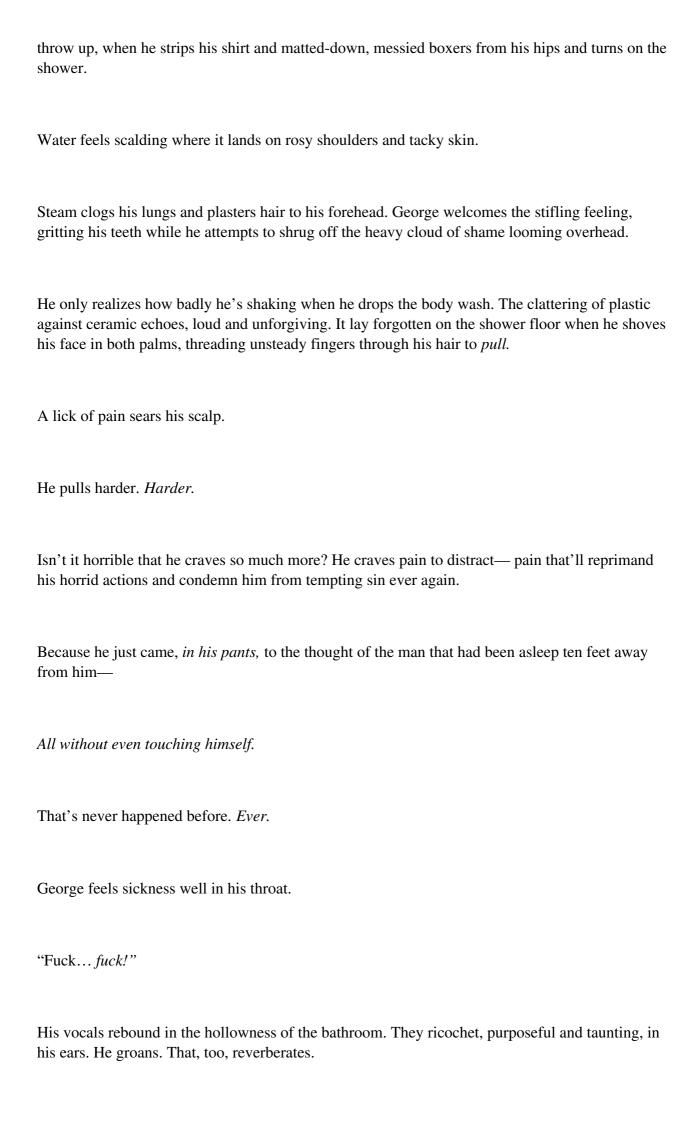
A ruddy cheek nuzzles into the cool pillow beneath his head. It does little good to wake him up





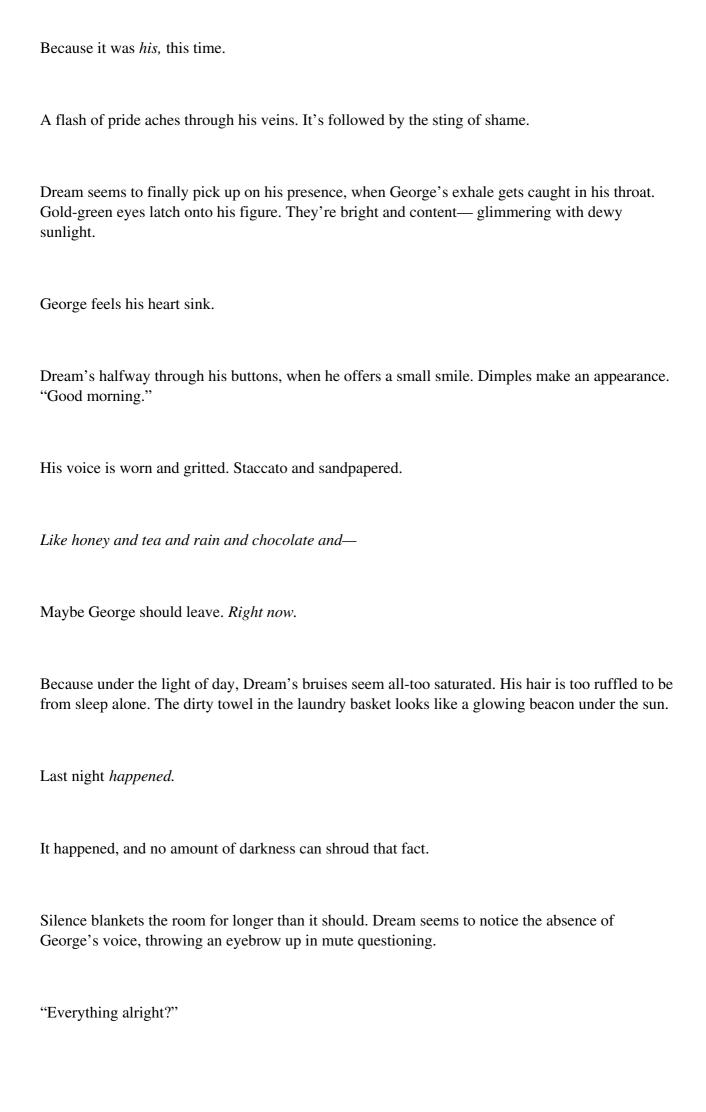




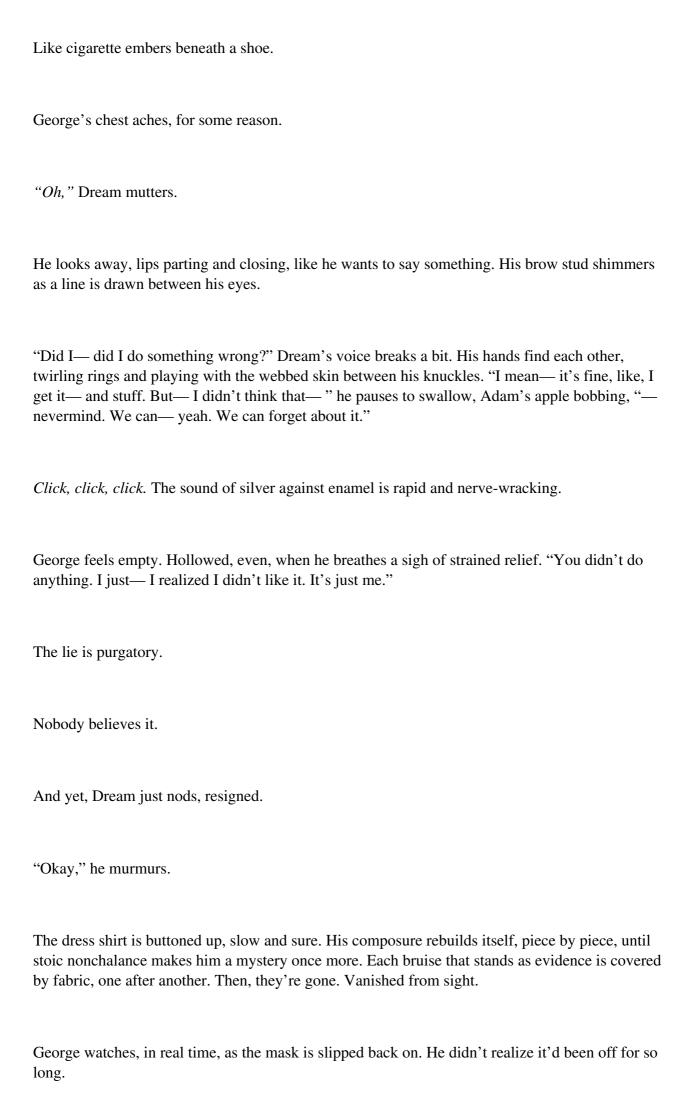


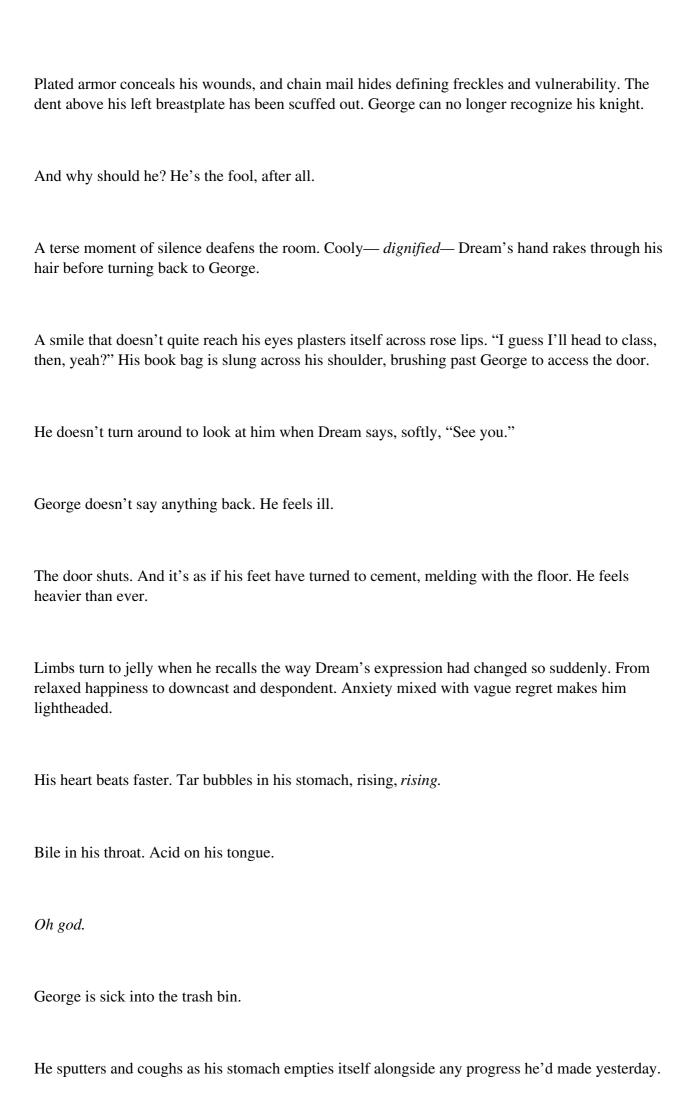
He knows he can't do this anymore.
Can't pretend like he doesn't want Dream in every way he can't have him. Can't listen to himself <i>deny</i> and <i>reason</i> and <i>scream</i> anymore.
Last night made things worse.
Because all George can see when he blinks is <i>Dream, Dream, Dream</i> . Dream panting and gasping. Dream bare and splayed under him. Dream in his palm. Dream between his teeth. On his tongue, in his lungs, dripping over his fingers.
Everything is fucked. Everything is wrong.
He doesn't even realize he's crying until it's too late. He's been doing that much too often lately—falling asleep with red-rimmed eyes and salt tracks on his cheeks.
Never before has he cried this much.
He doesn't even consider himself an emotional person, but something about Dream strips him of all barriers—drags his walls down until he's crumbling like rock eroded from heavy rainfall. There hasn't been a time in his life when he's ever been this vulnerable—this <i>exposed</i> .
When he steps out of the shower, the steam turns to smoke. It twirls about his shins and loops around his wrists. It chokes him, stings his eyes, burns his throat
Eyes flutter shut.
But it feels so good.
So wrong.

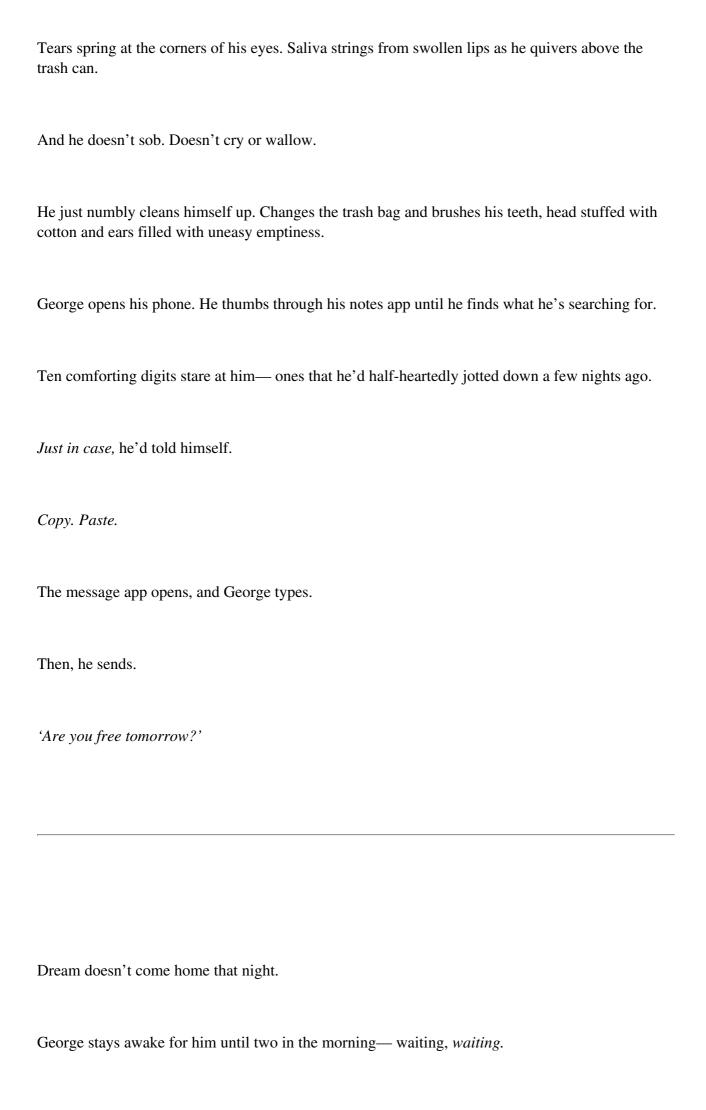
His reflection is tired. Hair wet and curled at the tips, lashes clumped, eyes swollen. <i>Pathetic</i> . <i>Defeated</i> .
Something brushes his foot. He looks down. Dirtied underwear stares back at him.
He can't fucking do this anymore.
George tugs on fresh clothes like a drone, unblinking. He throws the boxers away on his way out of the bathroom, fingers curling in a death grip around his towel when he goes for the handle to their room.
Beads of water drip from sodden hair into his vision. The world goes fuzzy again.
Maybe it'll make this easier.
Inhaling deeply, George enters the dorm.
Dreary sunlight filters through split blinds, casting golden rays to pool upon shame-drenched beds and shared, solemn floors.
In the center of it all, soaking up rain-acquainted sunshine—is Dream.
He stands on the carpet between their beds, loose jeans falling low on his hips. He's looking out the window as his fingers fumble with the buttons of his shirt, tan hands drowning in luminescent light. Rings glint where they rest—piercings in place and making Dream's rounded face into something more angular.
A sleeve slips off the shoulder closest to George.
He rips his gaze away, aggressively, when he notices the hickeys littering his neck and chest. No longer does George have to wonder which lips and tongues have brought blood to the surface of Dream's skin.



And, of course, he's as soft-spoken as ever. Gentle with his delivery and calm observation in his expression.
It makes goosebumps break out across George's skin. And that can't mean anything good.
George swallows down the pinpricks in his throat.
"Dream— I—" he chokes on grated syllables. He <i>stares</i> as Dream looks at him with mild confusion, head tilted to the side. George curses at himself when his heart flutters.
Maybe he just shouldn't say anything at all.
So he purses his lips: A feeble attempt, really. But the seam splits with ease at the rise of foolish, <i>foolish</i> words, and he goes numb.
"Can we pretend yesterday didn't happen."
A statement.
Not a question.
The delivery is so barren and disinterested that it shocks George himself, to some degree. Chirps of morning finches outside the window seem to go quiet.
Fire cools. Smoke dwindles.
Dream's face falls, as the words sink in.
It goes slack—smile dragged into a crestfallen frown, wrought with perplexion. His hands pause, and the last two buttons of his dress shirt flutter open. It's as if the glow in his eyes flickers out—snuffed away like a flame doused in water.



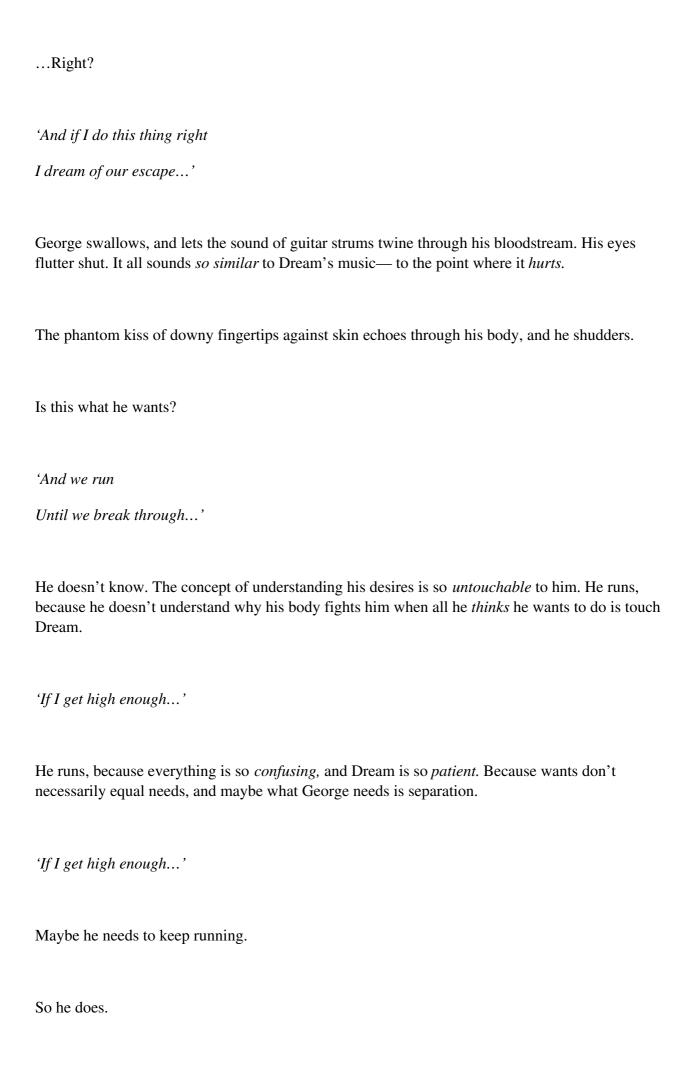


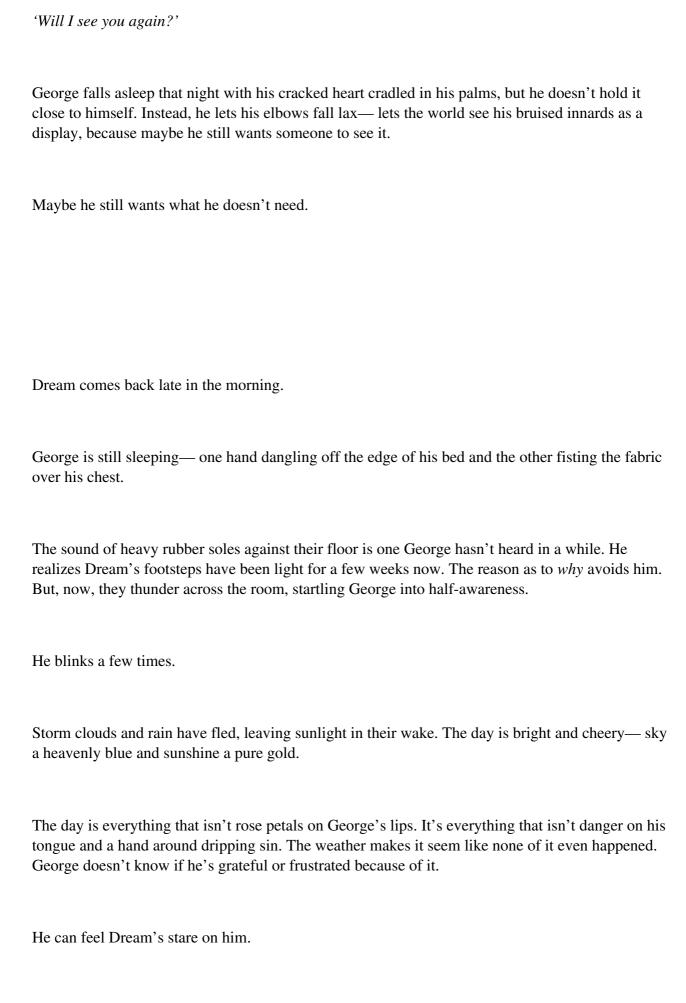


But he never shows.
So George spends his time nervously picking at the threads of his clean bedsheets. He'd washed them twice that day, as if laundry detergent would somehow undo the events of last night.
His bed smells sterile. It eases his anxiety, somewhat.
He also spends his day relearning music. The earbuds that'd sat abandoned in his drawer are cleaned with alcohol swabs and cotton buds until they glean pristine white.
Rock music and nineties classics attempt to fill the void between his ears. But as night creeps closer, the melodies start to all sound the same. They sound like gentle guitar strings and calm hums. Like the push and pull of the tide against a rain-swollen shore.
Like soft fingertips against stubble. Like red mouths and churning skies.
George decides listening to music was a bad idea.
But he never presses pause. He just tortures himself for hours on end, biting his lip to Wasteland, Baby and songs that caress the Dream-shaped initials in his core.
The song ends, and another begins. Dream hasn't come home yet.
The clock strikes one-thirty-two a.m.
George can't sleep.
It starts raining again, right as the guitar melody kicks in. A flash of lighting in the distance. The rumble of thunder in his bones.

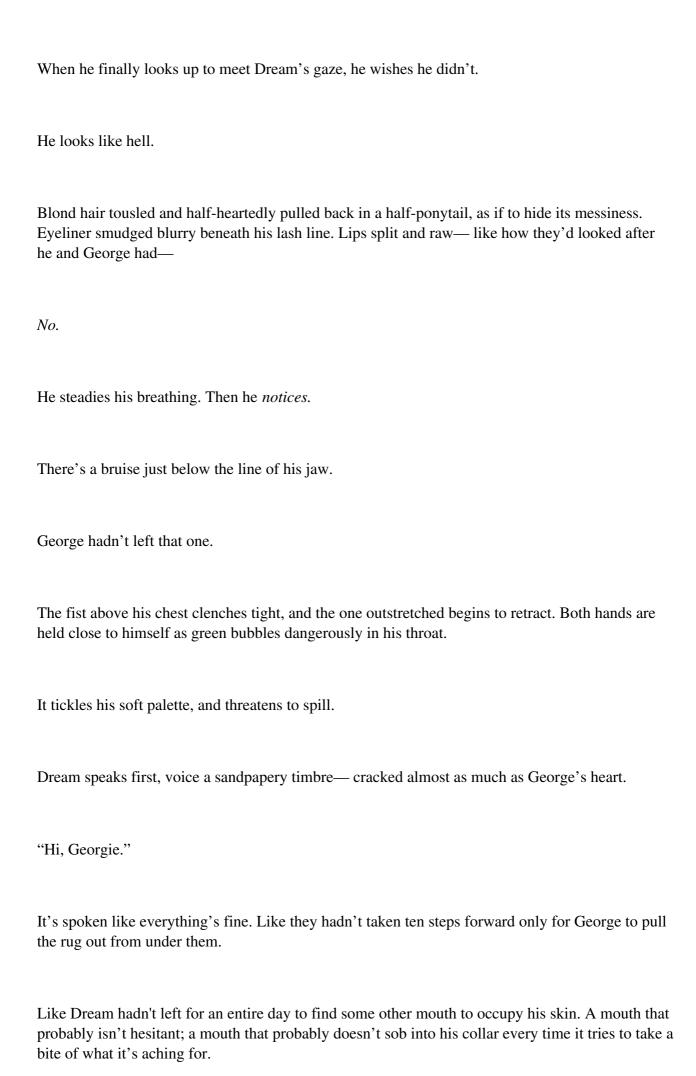
'I'll meet you at the divide

To break the spell'
George feels the storm outside migrate to his chest. It tightens— heart snared with knots and chains.
'A point where two worlds collide Yeah, we'll rebel'
Some foolish part of his mind wishes Dream would open the door. Wishes and <i>hopes</i> that he'd enter with tidy hair and neck still stained with bruises he knows the origin of . With no clothes askew and no body attached at his hip.
With a smile and skin still molded to George's touch.
'And we run Until we break through'
But George knows the sinking ache in his stomach very well. He knows how Dream spends his nightly outings, and no amount of <i>hope</i> can change that. He hates feeling broken by the crush of his own hands.
It's horrible— how George can push away the one thing that's been good for him and still feel betrayed.
'If I get high enough Will I see you again?'
He reminds himself that he has no right to feel that way. No right to feel this <i>empty</i> . Because he did what was best for himself, right?
'I feel my loss every night
Not long to wait'





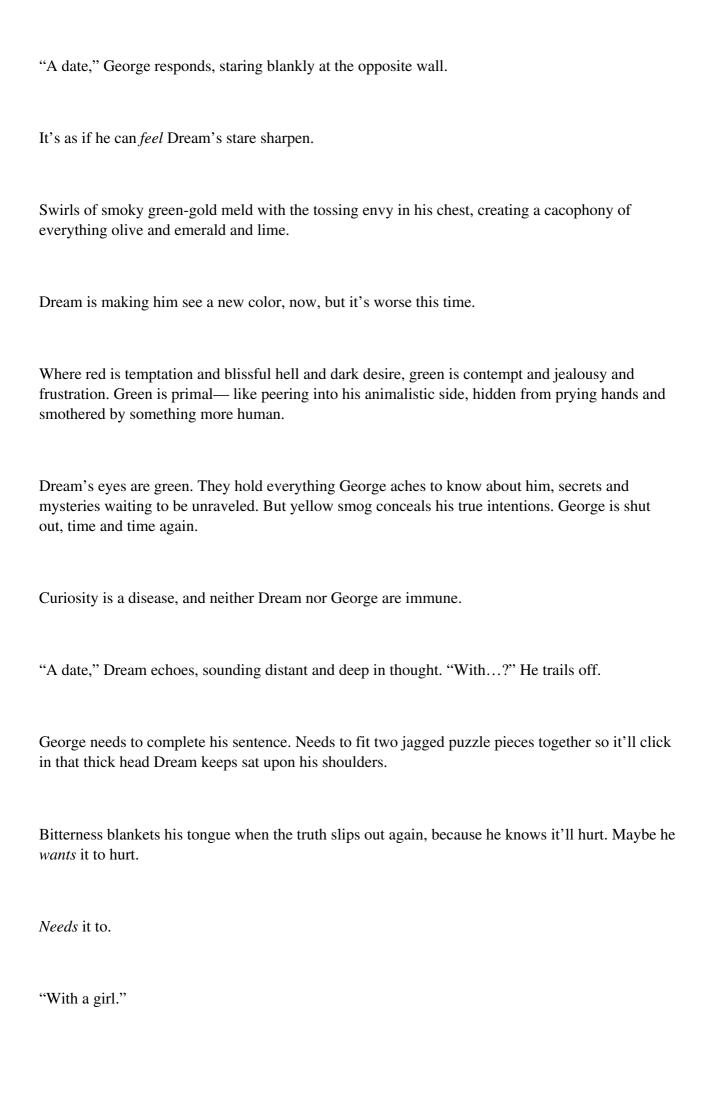
A mixture of reluctance and anxiety swirls beneath his skin. The hand dangling off his mattress unconsciously spreads open.



A body that's confident enough to keep him warm without running away.
George sits up in his bed and rakes a hand through his hair—stifling a yawn. Feigning nonchalance is something he's getting too acquainted with.
"Hi," he murmurs back, reserved and monotone. "Where were you?"
George isn't stupid. He knows it's dumb of him to ask when he's clearly figured it out already. But he doesn't want Dream to know that he knows. So he watches as the man before him drops his book bag and rubs the back of his neck.
Click, click, click.
George feels irked by the sound of his tongue piercing. Where it used to be attractive, it now sounds like nails on chalkboard— like needles on bones.
"A friend's house," Dream says. "Hadn't seen him in a while, y'know? So I just—stayed the night, I guess." Forest green looks away, eyes focused on the floor as he unzips his boots. The action is almost <i>guilty</i> , with the haste he does it in.
But George just hums, not believing a single word.
And he has a right to.
Because it's then that he registers the stifling smell of weed and someone else's cologne in his nose. It settles musty and thick against the back of his throat. Stinging his sinuses, clogging his veins, shattering his heart, <i>more</i> and <i>more</i> and <i>more</i> .
Fuck.
George knew he shouldn't have let his heart lay so vulnerable like that. He should've kept it close, unreachable, so as to not damage it further.

So he lets himself go blank.
He picks up his phone, unplugs it, and remembers the text conversation he'd had yesterday— the promises he'd made to himself when he'd sent off those four words and received an affirmation back.
This is what he needs.
And he convinces himself it's okay like this.
So George gets out of bed and stretches, arms over his head. Dream stares at where his shirt rides up, and fire boils beneath his skin. He simmers it quickly—dousing it with anger and envy and betrayal until it sizzles out into glowing ash.
But it's obvious the flame can come back with the right treatment. If someone breathed a little air into it, the embers would jump right back into an inferno.
George tells himself it's put out for good.
He ignores the way Dream's eyes follow his movements— tracking his hands as they pull off his shirt and sleep shorts, honing in on the way he buckles his belt. George feels his skin crawl and prickle where green-gold falls.
The room is filled with an uneasy silence as he gets dressed. Not even the chirp of birds or hum of cicadas interrupt their own personal hell.
As if unbothered by the tension settling thick on his shoulders, George pulls on his nicest dress shirt and uncaps the neglected cologne on his desk. There's a creak of protest from the joints of Dream's chair as he leans back.
Brown avoids green, and George checks the time.





Immediate disappointment radiates off Dream in waves. It washes over George like the tide during a hurricane—sudden and overwhelming; drowning his senses and jamming his airway with liquid dismay. He doesn't even have to look at Dream to know the expression he wears. Every nerve in George's body still magnetizes itself in Dream's direction. They still scream to give into what he's most afraid of— to experience pain before he can experience pleasure. But George believes he's too weak for that. It's time for him to abandon danger for safety. "George..." The word leaves Dream's lips like a plea. It's choked out—drenched in regret and sorrow and guilt. It almost makes George scoff. Because it's his decision. It's his decision to undo the progress he's made, to walk backwards from where Dream holds out his hand—palm supine and the perfect size to cradle George's split heart. And yet, George runs backwards, tripping over heels and cracks in the pavement he's blind to. Because while his body retreats, his eyes stay trained in front of him. On Dream. And George hates himself for it. "Don't," he warns, knowing Dream is preparing a speech for him. He likes to think he knows how Dream's brain works—how his arrogant, thick, confident brain works.

And it works by spilling his thoughts. By spewing every passionate belief that churns in that broad chest of his, mixing rationality with emotion so *well* that it nearly convinces George every time.

So George stops him before he's able to say a single word.

He doesn't want to be convinced anymore.
It seems to work. Dream has nothing left to say, and the tension and thick spite in the air leaves them both choking.
George doesn't look behind him when he slams the door shut.
She looks ethereal today.
Face sloped to mimic the goddesses and dress hugging her figure like a second skin— a leather jacket situated across her shoulders, shielding barren arms from the chill of late-autumn wind.
Her smile reflects the sunshine pooling through the window of the diner they're seated at.
Blond hair shimmers in a golden glow. Smile lines jump out with each giggle.
They play footsie under the table. George shoots her a teasing grin when she toes up the line of his calf, a mischievous glint reflecting in the sky-blue of her irises.
It's all talk and laughs and jokes—calm, cool, and <i>safe</i> . They work through their food slowly, both in no rush to leave their little slice of heaven.
He feels almost grateful that he'd written down the digits that'd been scrubbed off the skin of his arm.
And George thinks, in another lifetime, he could've fallen in love with her. A lifetime where things weren't as confusing; a lifetime where he's not hung up on some piercing-studded deviant. But the shame in his chest reminds him that this is not that lifetime.

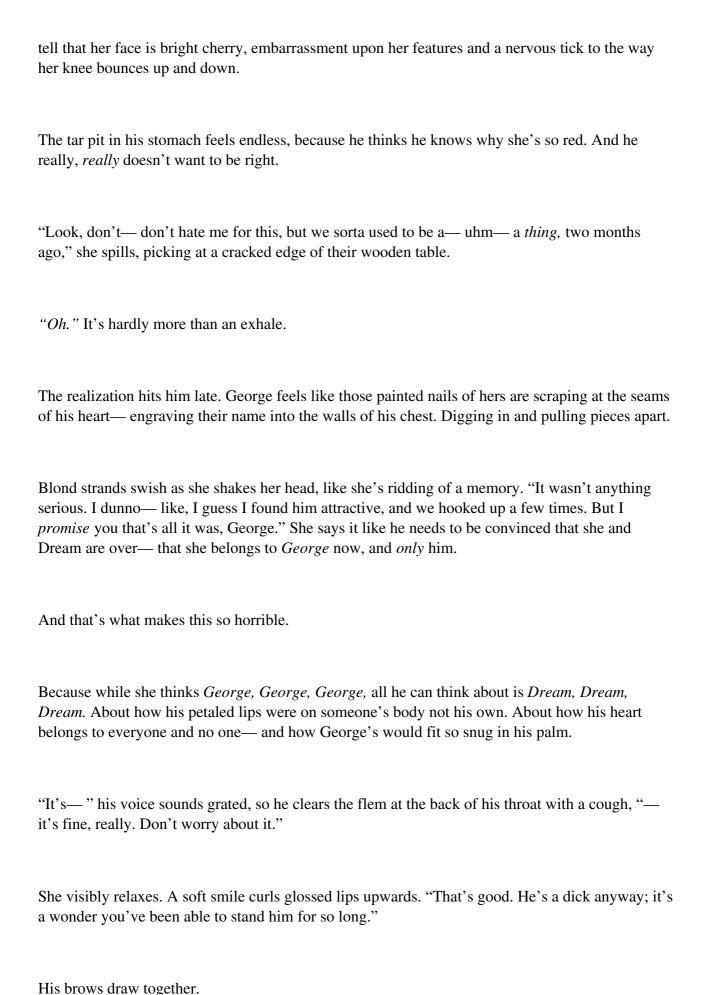
He still thinks he can prove the universe— *Dream*— wrong; he can figure this out. He can let himself fall back into the ease of dating a girl who sings symphonies with her aura and not her guitar. Someone who's confident without poisoning George from the inside out with claws dipped in temptation and sin. He can do this. "George? You alright?" *Oh.* He didn't realize he'd been quiet for so long. It's ironic, because despite how hard he's trying, he still finds himself on a date, with just the person to solve his problems—zoning out because he's thinking of him. "Yeah," he breathes back. Her stare hardens with worry. Pity. Stop pitying me, I'm fine. I'm fine, stop worrying about me, please, please— "I'm fine!" George blurts, dismissively waving his hands in front of his face. "Just—spacing out, I guess. I've been having some—" he pauses to choose his next words carefully, "—roommate issues, and I can't stop thinking about it for the life of me." A few strained laughs escape his chest. She pouts her lip in a way he should find endearing, and taps the side of his shin with the sole of her shoe. "Okay. You can always talk to me, yeah?"

For some reason, he still thinks he can do this.

The pout morphs into a reassuring smile, and her palm falls on top of his hand where it lay on the

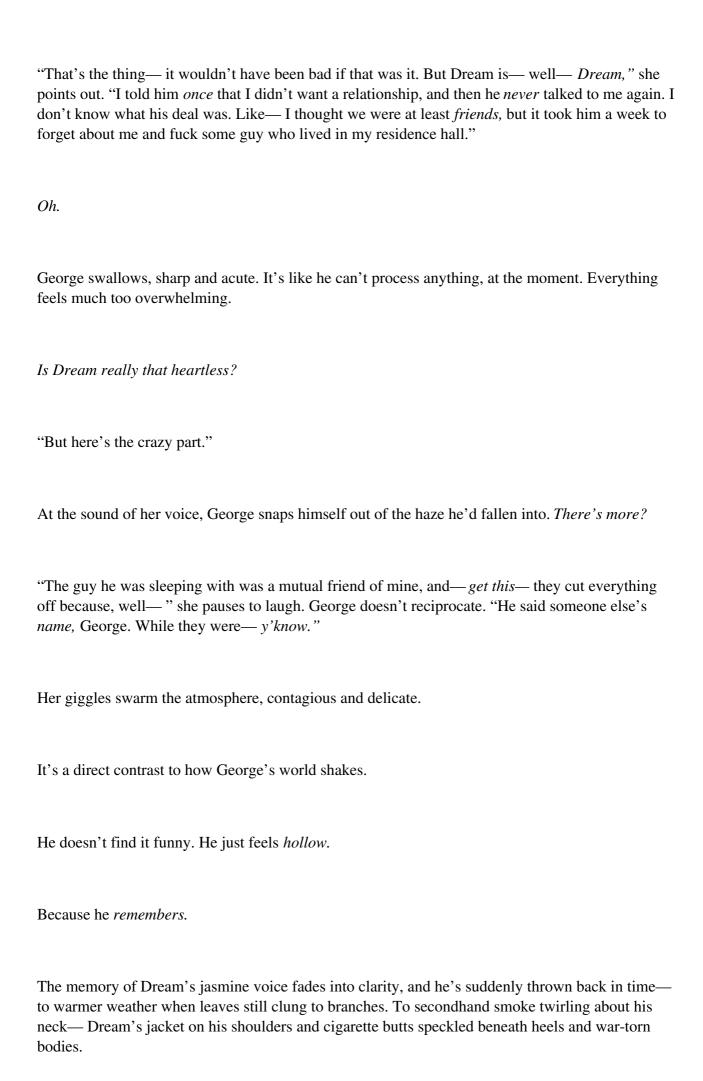
George nods. Acknowledged, but nothing more.





Confusion knits the muscles of his face tight.





"I said something I didn't mean to say to my—my date tonight." Even in memory, Dream's voice is laden with addiction. It draws George in; it splices him up into smaller and smaller pieces, grounding him to dust. The flicker of a flame flashes behind George's eyes. An inhale, an exhale. Phantom cannabis and smog stings his eyes. "It was... embarrassing. But also really, really shitty of me. I've been doing that a lot lately." Then, George hears his own voice. It's timid—hushed and breathy. "Do you know why you keep messing things up?" A pause. The echo of silver against pearl teeth—once, twice, three times. A soft smile. "Yeah, I do. But I don't think I can stop." George's chest constricts even further, if possible. He doesn't know what to think. Dream had seemed so unequivocally *open* that day— so willing to spill his soul to a broken one in need of repair. So painfully, brutally *honest* that it hurt to listen to.

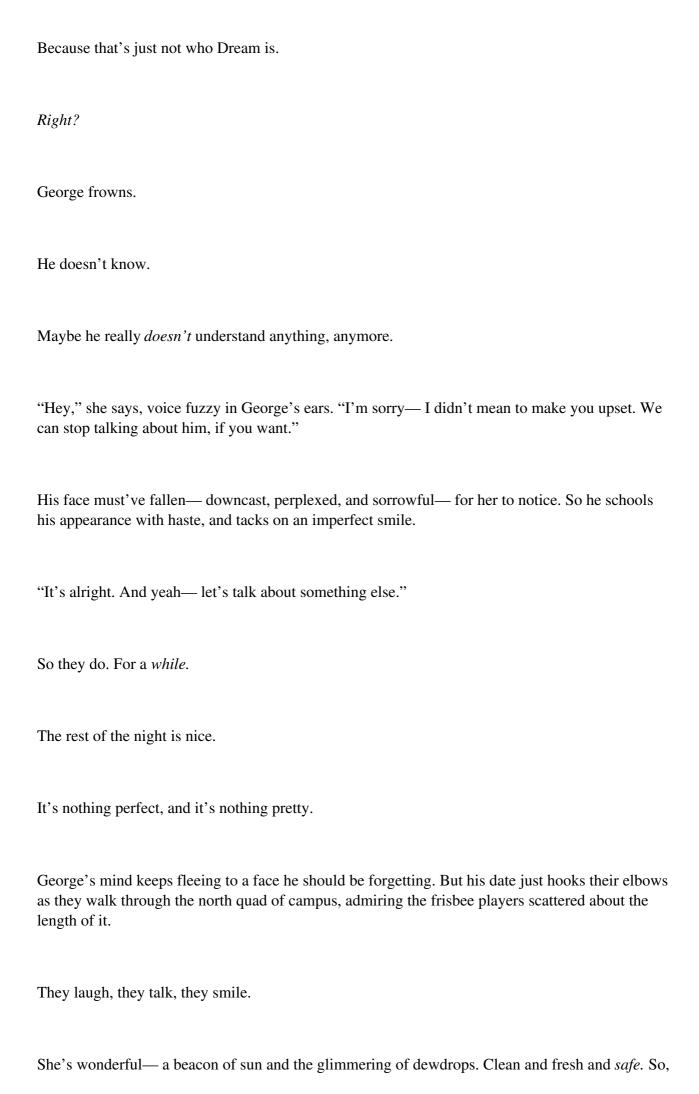
It's nearly impossible to paint the persona that this girl describes upon Dream's features—his *mannerisms*. Dream, who breathed life into him when he couldn't inhale without choking on tears.

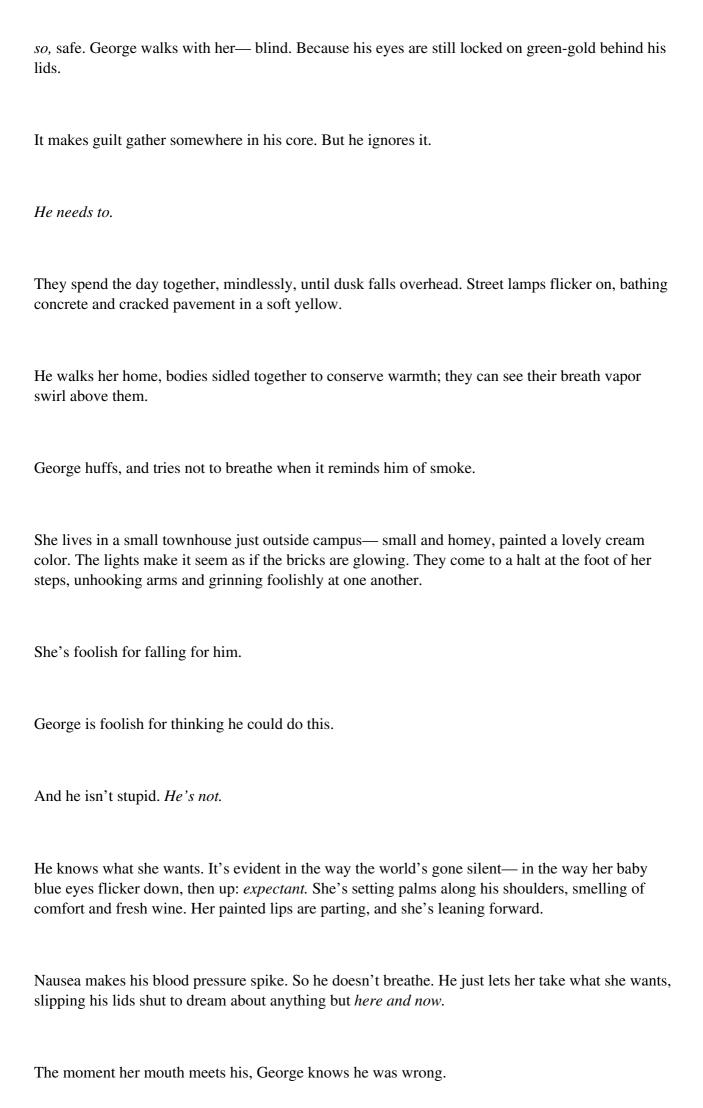
Dream, who waited. Who was patient and kind and respectful, even when George was everything

Dream, who offered rosey smiles and vanilla lattes and Asiago bagels each morning.

but.

His date must be mistaken. Must be.

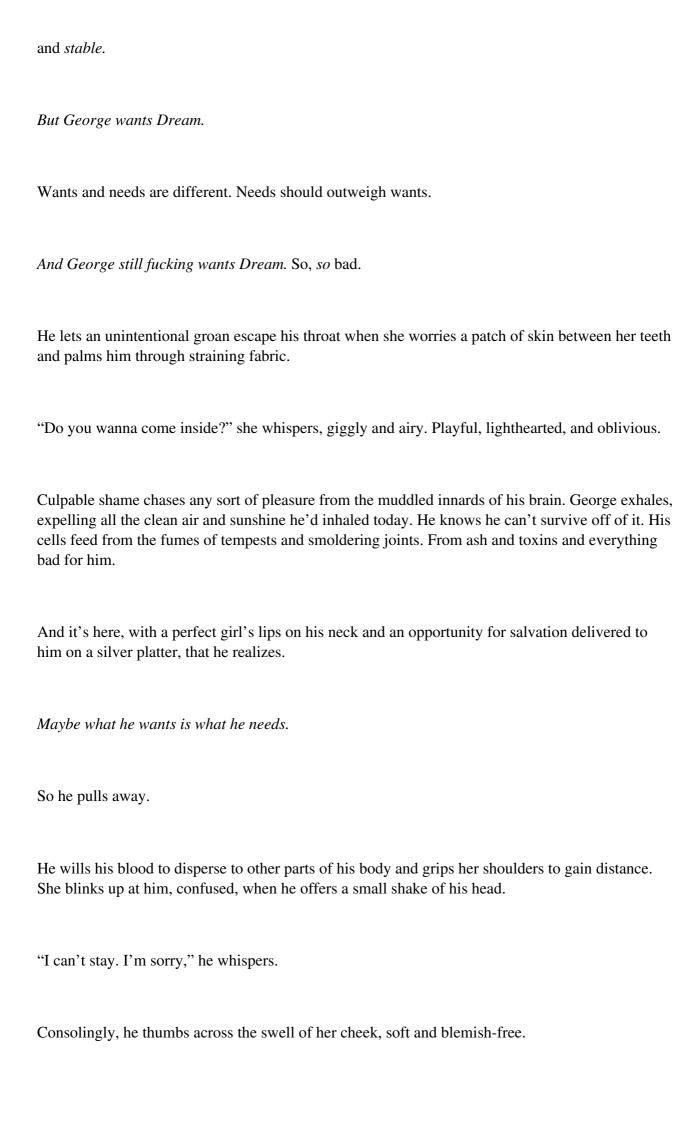




Because he can't do this. It's embarrassing—just how much tension threads through his muscles when her tongue parts his lips to taste his teeth. His brows draw together. He fights down the anxiety and frustration—the green and red storm battling beneath his skin. George turns on autopilot, kissing her robotically with little tongue and spit. The taste in his mouth is stale and bittersweet. She laps it up like a starved woman. There's so much *passion* behind her lips, and George's heart splinters further. Because he can't muster anything besides the droning shuffle of his jaw—up, down... up, down. Waxy lipstick. In his mouth, on his jaw, in the crease of his neck. She bites, licks, *sucks*— decorates the column of his throat in marks he'd forbeyed Dream to leave. Her teeth are blunter than his. Her tongue lacks glinting jewelry. Her fingers are small and naked. George copes. He recalls the slimness of Dream's waist between his palms, when George lays his hands upon her hips. He replaces the murky aftertaste on his tongue with sin, danger, and poison—with smoke and windswept rainfall. George thinks about the noises Dream made when he'd touched him. About low, pretty, pretty moans and silky whines. About heavy panting with silver glimmering in the corner of his eye. About velvety, flushed skin with pumping blood underneath, twitching and foreign in his palm.

George thinks he needs this. He thinks he needs a girl like this one—glassy-eyed and possessive

Humiliation feels blinding when his pants get tighter.





Truly, he has no idea what to expect when he enters their dorm.

George could be met with anger, or with betrayal, or with avoidance. He could be met with nothing at all; a barren room and knowledge that Dream is occupying another bed somewhere far from the bite of George's tongue.

He steels himself for just that—clammy hand fisted about the handle. The metal goes slick with condensation.

Shoulders tense. Toes curl in his shoes.

He opens the door slowly. Trepidation fuels his hesitance, biting the meaty part of his cheek and breathing unsteadily.

But the scene before him is nothing he could've predicted. His eyes widen, jaw going slack.

The soles of his shoes feel rooted to the entryway, when his eyes fall upon Dream's side of the room. His heart seizes up.

He's sat in bed, torso propped against the headboard. The column of his throat draws George's gaze in— arched delicately, exposed and speckled in stubble as his head tilts back to rest on the wall behind him. Oakwood lashes conceal his eyes, brows drawn inward. Like he's concentrating — like he's *pained*.

George's spit thickens when he realizes Dream is shirtless. Freckles and day-old hickeys on display. Chest rising and falling with each breath.

Sweatpants hang dangerously low on his hips, ankles crossed over one another and legs splayed in front of him.

His guitar is sat in his lap. Two corded hands cradle its neck and thumb across its strings.

Cannabis floods George's senses. He inhales— deep.
There's a joint dangling between Dream's teeth. Smog from smoke that'd caressed the insides of his lungs dances near the ceiling, and it enters George's windpipe. Those same vapors memorize his lungs, too.
Melodic chords, sugar-coated and lovely, sound rich in his ears—just like all of Dream's music.
But George frowns.
The song is melancholy, today.
Steeped in watered-down tea, laden in rain that smells like decay. Pessimistic and dreary.
Why does this hurt so much?
George's eyes go blurry with unshed tears.
"Dream," he croaks.
The music halts. There's no drawn-out strum or lingering, poignant vibration. It's cut off— abrupt and harsh.
Dream's eyes shoot open. Surprise oozes from green-gold when they lock onto George's beaten and bruised figure.
A hand drifts away from his guitar to remove the joint from cracked lips. Ash sprinkles onto the bedspread like snow during winter.

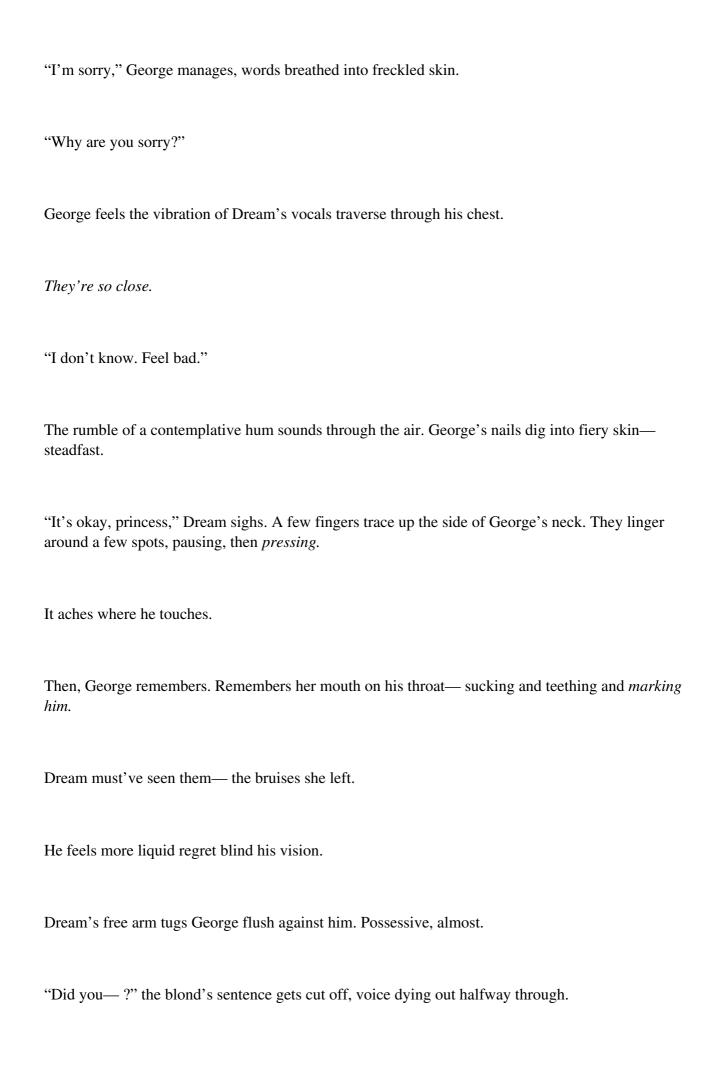
"George...?"

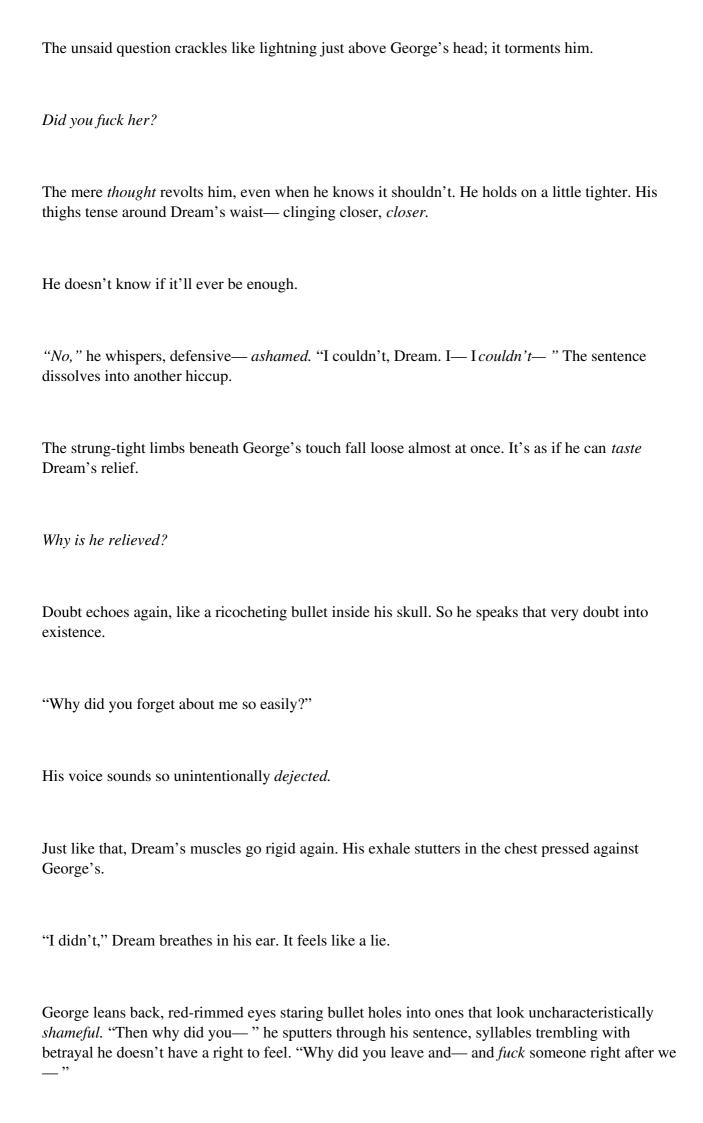
It's a quiet, quiet utterance of his name. But it's so, so lovely.
George feels his heart melt— some pieces melding into one. His shoulders quiver with released tension as the first tears of the night begin to fall. They collect at his chin, splattering on the floor about his feet.
Those same feet kick off his shoes and carry him blindly towards his magnetized addiction, pausing at the side of Dream's bed. He hiccups, fingers gripping the hem of his dress shirt. It wrinkles when he <i>clenches</i> . Wet eyes look up at Dream, desperate and broken.
His breathing goes all weird when he's met with a contemplative, hard stare.
George gulps. "Do you— do you hate me?"
His voice pathetically breaks. Another sob wracks through his body. He shoves the heels of his palms in his eye sockets. Sunspots gather in the void behind his eyes. Green and red tinge the edges.
The room is deathly silent.
George is so, so scared.
He's terrified that he's made Dream hate him. That he's so disposable and broken that there's nothing left to salvage.
God.
George hates himself.
There's a sigh from above him.



Anything to steer them away from seriousness. Anything to steer them away from their faults—their *mistakes*.







He stops to breathe, teeth gnawing at his swollen lip. The silence in the room feels deafening in the absence of his voice. "It was my— my first time doing that with a g-guy. And you made me feel so… *special*. But then you can go off and do the same fucking thing with s-someone else right after when I was still *confused* and I just— I don't *understand*, Dream."

Dream's eyes swim with something unreadable. There's understanding, guilt, frustration. There's *so much*. So his expression flatlines, as if to compensate for the torrent of emotion in his gaze.

"George, I didn't fuck *anyone*, okay? I was—I was afraid I misinterpreted something, or that I fucked shit up with you, and I was—" A groan tears from his chest. His forehead drops to George's shoulder, the thumb at his waist tracing little circles into fabric. "I was *desperate*, alright? So, *yes*, I let someone... *touch* me. But we *didn't* have sex. It was just making out and smoking and stuff, I *promise* you."

Promises.

George's lips purse as he mulls over his words. He thinks back to the conversations he'd had with his date tonight, and there are just so many *contradictions*— so many unanswered questions and inquiries George should be asking.

But he comes up dry.

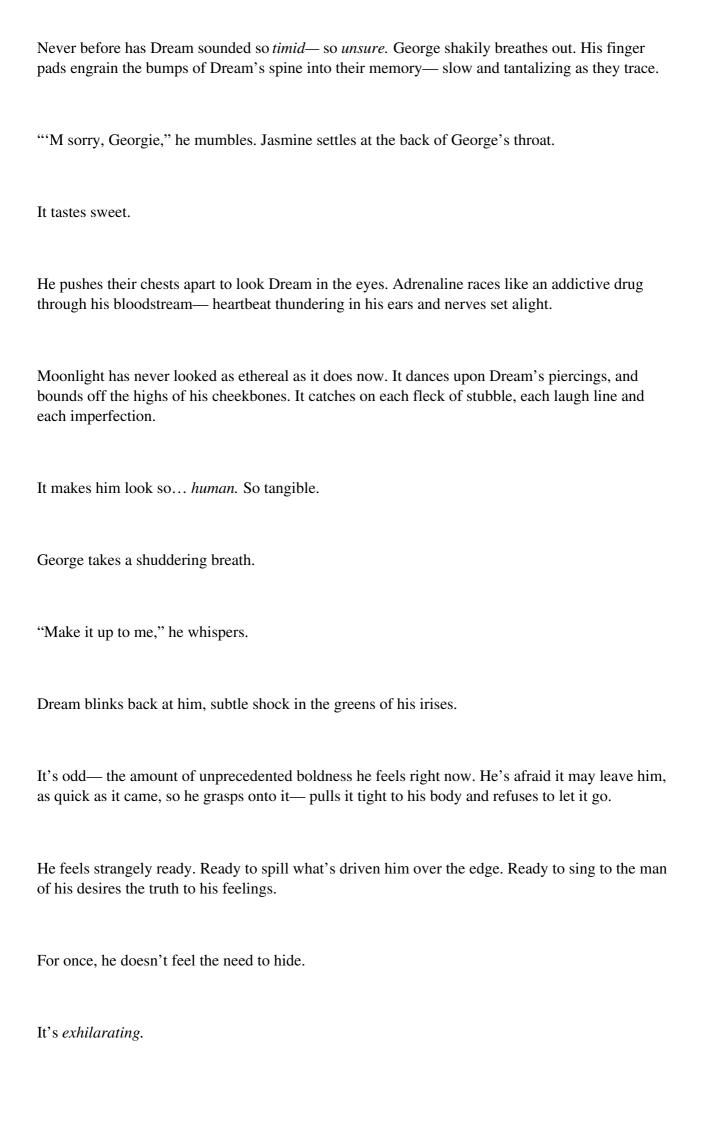
"Then why didn't you come home?" is the only thing he manages to ask. His words are taut and stretched thin.

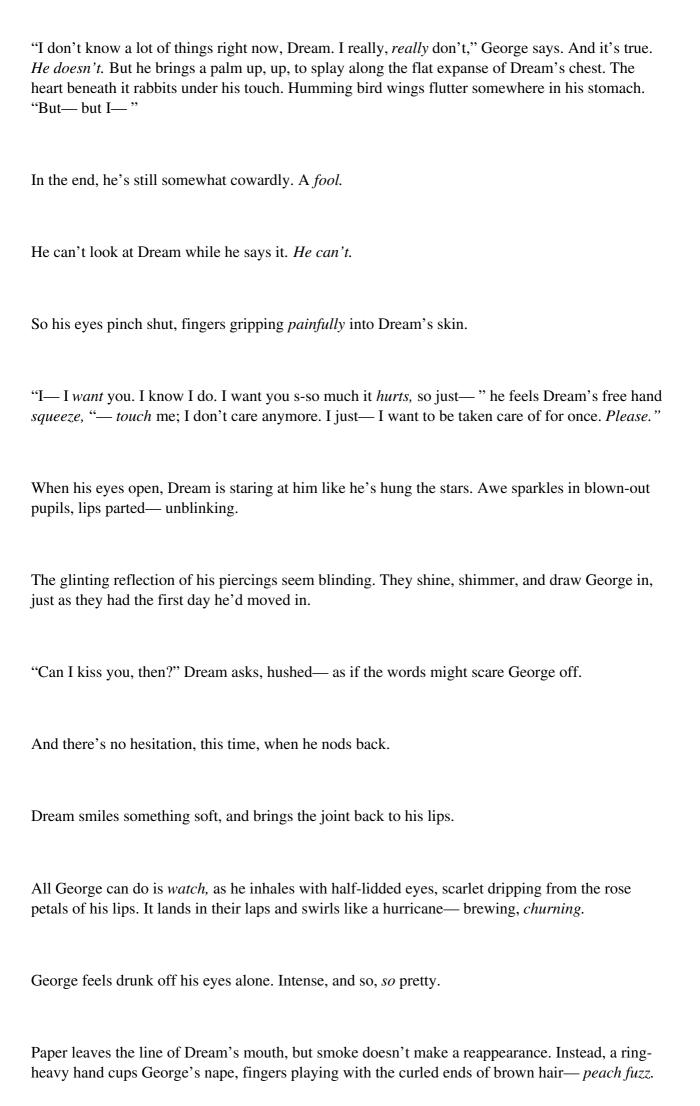
Dream presses a kiss to George's collar—so fleeting and delicate it almost goes undetected.

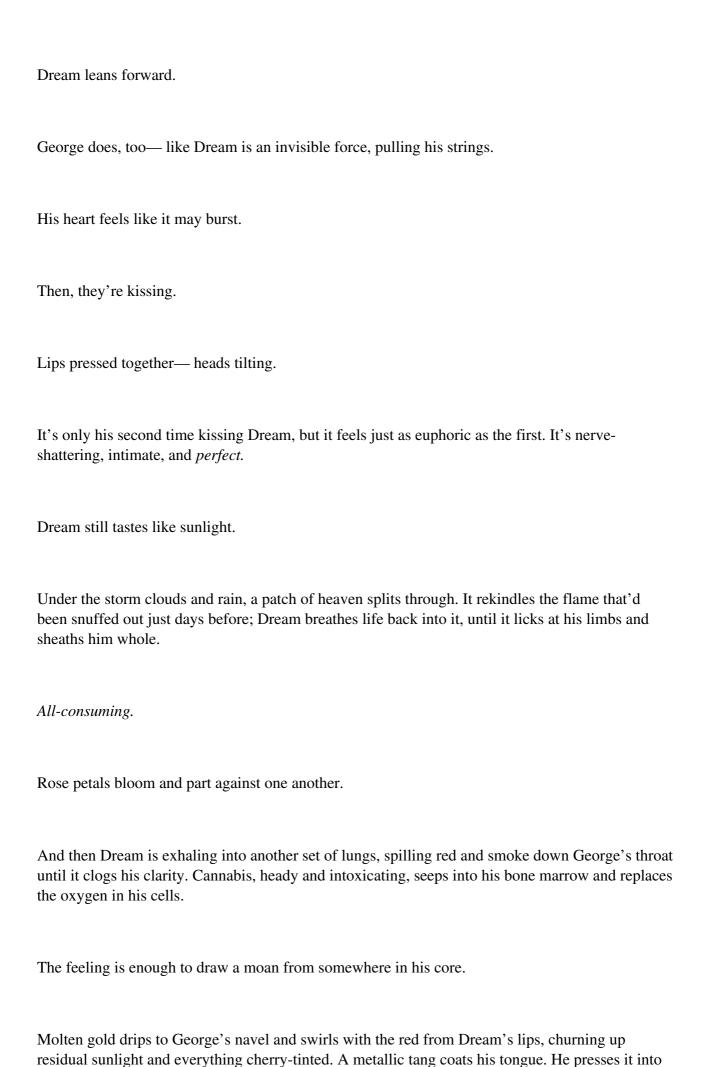
"I didn't think you wanted to see me."

Oh.

A slow buzz hums like the electricity of a livewire beneath his surface. Warmth floods his heart.







Dream's mouth and urges him to taste it as well— swapping inhaled, exhaled smoke; back and forth, back and forth.
George lets the drug sink deeper— deeper.
They part, if only enough for Dream to take another hit between them. Embers at the tip of the joint flare up, tossing hellish light upon the planes of their faces.
His breathing is labored, as George watches Dream inhale and <i>hold</i> .
It's barely another second before their mouths crash back together. George's nails tear into Dream's skin, making him feel the claws that'd dug a home in his shoulders for weeks upon weeks.
A muffled noise leaves Dream's throat and enters George's. He swallows down the air, the smoke, the <i>sin</i> , that Dream offers him. Sucks it down like a madman— <i>thrives</i> off it. His mind goes all muddled— swamped by nothing and everything, by <i>red</i> and <i>Dream</i> and <i>smoke</i> and <i>sun</i> .
George doesn't know when he'd gotten pinned to the mattress. He doesn't remember losing his shirt, his socks, his pants.
But he remembers Dream's eyes.
The way they'd glowed as each clothing item fell to the floor, face lighting up like he was unwrapping a gift.
Stale ash taints the inside of his nose. The joint lay smothered and forgotten on the nightstand.
Dream decorates his neck with his teeth, ghosting the silver shot through his tongue along the length of his collarbone. He marks him like he's trying to undo the damage done by another mouth.
Like he's replacing the lingering remnants of his fading heterosexuality with blistering wrongfulness.



Everything Dream does is gentle.

His tongue, his hands, his words; they all coax George's fears into desires. He kisses down his sternum and drags fingertips along the jut of his hip bones, memorizing slow and easy.

A gasp spills from his tongue in carmine sweetness when Dream's mouth presses to the dip of his belly. His muscles seize and ripple, hand flying down to fist in golden hair. Every part of him is so *fucking* sensitive, and Dream knows just where to touch—just where he needs to press to get George to *tick*.

Dream looks up at him through long, *long* lashes, when he reaches the hem of his underwear. A kiss plants itself on its seam, and George's legs press together involuntarily.

He's been sucked off before. By gorgeous girls in miniskirts and his exs in his clothes— by glossed lips with long hair brushing his thighs and high-pitched noises from upturned noses.

But *this*— this is *Dream*.

Dream, who's looking at him like a starved man, with glitter in his eyes and a fire to his skin. Stubble along his jaw and a squareness to his face. A heavy brow bone and low vocals.

"I—" George's words get caught in his throat. "I don't think I can look at you, if you do that."

There's no sound of protest. Just a grin and two fingers snapping elastic against George's navel. "If I do what, Georgie?"

Red blisters across his cheeks. "If you— if you use your mouth. It's just— it's still too much. I think I'll freak out on you if I watch."

Dream's face softens. A reassuring look crosses through his eyes, and he smiles. George falters when he thinks he sees something dark and vaguely sad flash there, too. But it's gone as soon as he blinks.

"That's okay. Just—look at the ceiling. I'll make you feel good, princess."

So George lets his gaze float skywards, landing upon the void of blackness above him. He finds solace in it—*comfort*. Whether it's because it serves as a new way to avoid confrontation, or whether it just soothes the anxious part of his soul, George doesn't care.

Because his nails dig into Dream's scalp, *pressing*, when something *warm* and *wet* mouths over the tent in his briefs.

A small, rattling moan slips from his throat. He doesn't think he's ever sounded so... *needy*.

When Dream slips his last shred of fabric dignity down the length of his thighs, his calves, his ankles; he does it with such painful *sincerity*. With kisses to the inside of both knees, with whispers of encouragement and praise.

Each word echoes in George's ears as he blinks back tears and stares half-lidded at the ceiling.

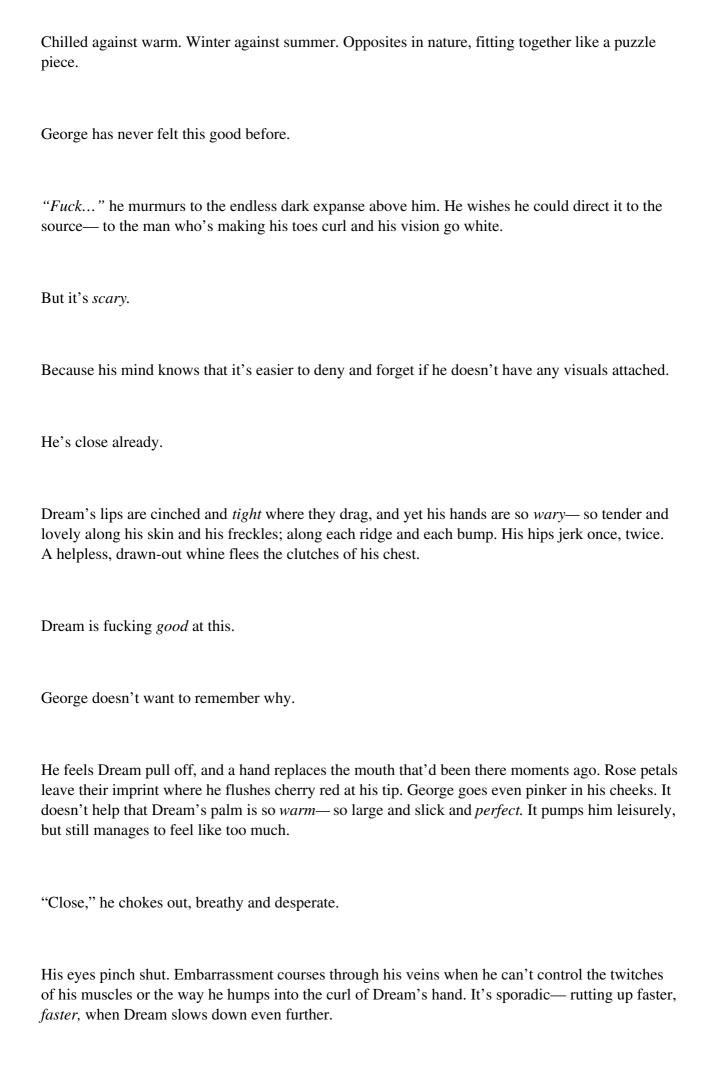
It's so *good*.

And when Dream gets his mouth on him, George absolutely *shatters*. The cracks of his heart feel like they've had a lighter taken to them—pieces melting and mixing to solidify into something larger.

He relies on touch, feel, and sound.

The tickle of soft hair and rough stubble against his inner thighs. The sound of slick spit—trailing deltas of molten lava between his legs. The downy pads of fingers tracing mindless patterns along his sides, his chest, his legs. George is quivering—one hand threaded in Dream's hair and the other digging trenches into his ribs. He *grips*, because he's afraid he might lose himself already.

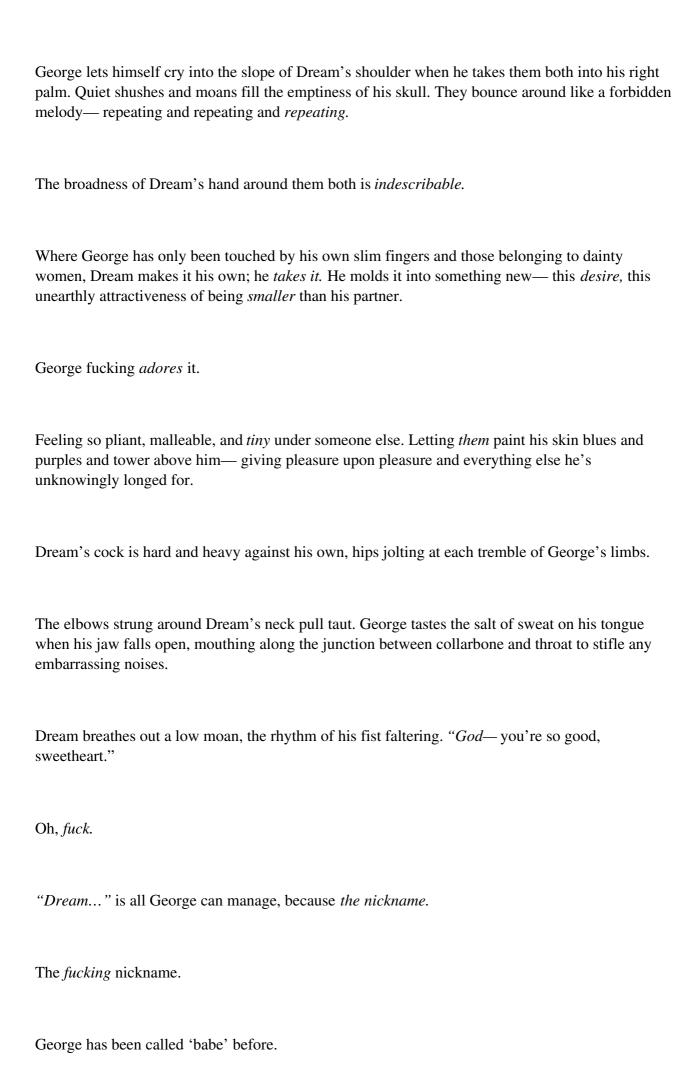
Gold in his belly feels as though it may burst prematurely, with how Dream's piercing feels against him. He digs it just beneath the crown, then dips it into the slit; it's a cool contrast to the intense hotness of breath and tongue.



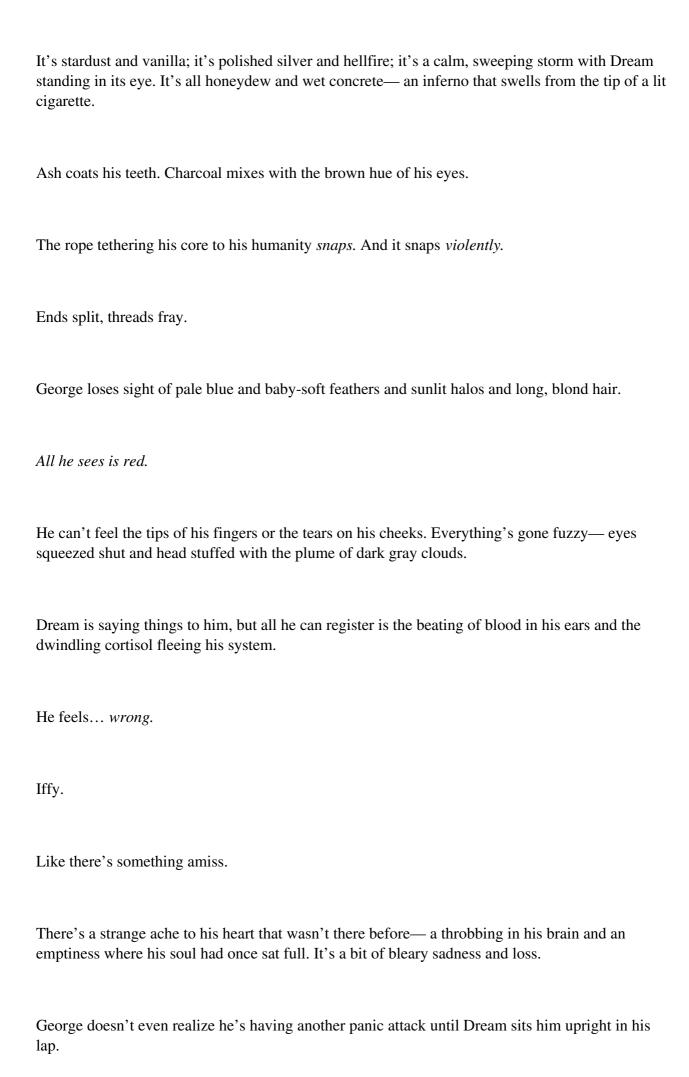


The muscles of George's stomach contract and twitch when Dream hooks his left arm under the lumbar of his back, hoisting two pairs of slim hips together—skin on skin, buzzing with nerves

and pink, pink, pink.

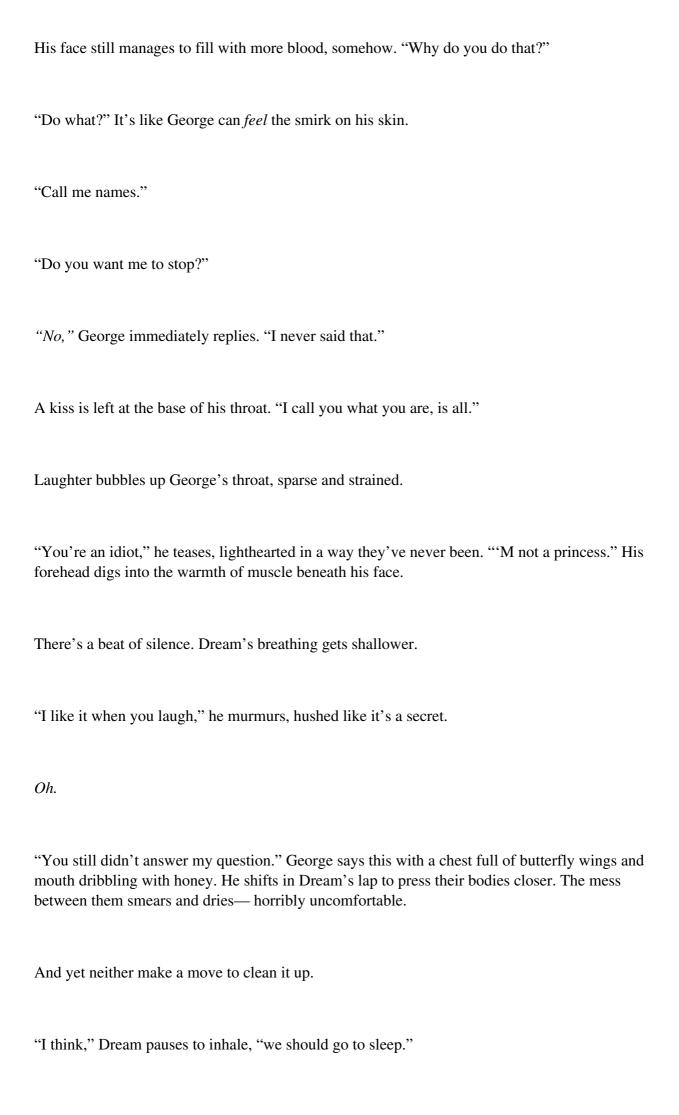


And when George cums, it's like nothing he's experienced before.



They're both painted white up to their necks, and George can't breathe. Dream's skin is under his nails, and the world is going dark. There are hickeys petaling his hip bones, and George is <i>crying</i> .
Fat tears scorch where they land. He's letting out gross, wet-sounding sobs that shake his ribs and shoulders. He's gasping and sputtering and drooling down his chin.
And yet, Dream doesn't budge.
He lets George go through what he needs to—helping him through it with no protest.
Dream's hand feels so perfect, soothing along the expanse of his back—rubbing little circles into his shoulder blades and the knobs of his spine. The other is messied, awkwardly held out to the side as it drips with the climax of George's needs and wants.
"It f-felt so <i>good</i> —" he hiccups his way through a sentence he didn't mean to say aloud.
And Dream shushes him gently, with little whispers of " <i>I know</i> " and subtle caresses. "Shh, you're alright," he promises. "I've got you, b— princess."
If George weren't fighting his airway for clearance, he might've questioned the stutter to Dream's words. But, here he is, crying into another man's shoulder all because he made him feel the most pleasure he's ever felt— <i>ever</i> .
And although his body fights him for wanting what he wants, he's still able to come down. To reenter the world he's stepped foot in. To <i>breathe</i> .
Finally.
He feels new.
George's full-body spasms eventually teeter out into a light quiver. His toes uncurl, muscles unwinding.





"Well I think you should answer my question."

"Hey," Dream pulls back to look George in the eye. Both men grimace as skin on skin stickily pulls apart. "I don't think you should be talking like that to the guy who just made you cum the hardest you ever have in your *life*."

Dull indignance flares up George's tongue. "That wasn't— you didn't—" he pauses his stuttering to groan. "Your ego is so annoying."

There's a few more laughs. It's strangely tranquil—like the calm stillness after a hurricane, leaves sodden and plastered to the pavement.

George doesn't know what morning will bring.

Where last time he felt anxious and pessimistic about waking up with the memories of the night prior, he now feels blindly prepared. He feels like he's going to wake up with Dream at his side—warm comforter and zero regrets. With content blanketing his limbs and rain against the window.

"Can I stay here tonight?" George asks. His eyes droop with heavy exhaustion, red rimmed lids threatening to fall shut.

"Of course," Dream murmurs with a kiss to his temple, "sweetheart."

With a scoff, George shoves their bodies apart. "Stop."

"I don't think I will. Sorry, Georgie."

With enough distance, Dream's flushed features are on full display. His lip ring has been jostled and tilted to the side, pink rose petals tinted a raw carmine from biting and kissing. There's a bite mark on his shoulder, and George looks away when he remembers the taste of his skin.

Dream shuffles out from under George's weight, throwing both legs over the side of the bed. He

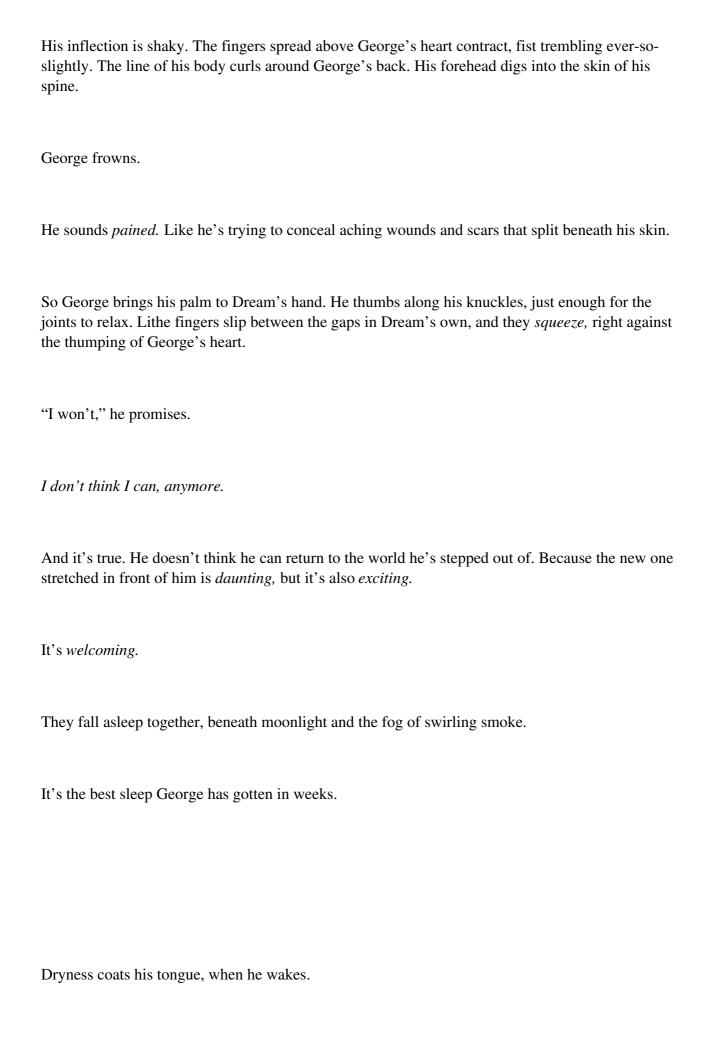
regards George with a tender glance before retrieving his fallen boxers and a washcloth. There's still the lingering sting of shame—being in another man's bed, coated in his marks and completely bare on his sheets. So George covers his lap with a pillow and huffs at himself. It's a dumb feeling to have—he knows this. But Dream doesn't comment on it. He just coos at George's blush and lets him clean himself up, leaping back onto the lofted bed with eased grace. Green eyes look away as he shimmies back into his briefs, like he can read George's mind—his heart and his conflicted feelings. He smiles to himself at the blond's considerate nature. When they lie down next to each other, nose to nose, George doesn't know what to do with his hands, his legs, his *anything*. The bed is twin-sized, barely large enough to fit both their bodies. So he hesitates. He hangs back and cradles his arms close to his body—bites his lip and looks down at the pillow. "George," Dream murmurs suddenly, fingertips brushing along George's shoulder, "do you trust me?" Do you trust me? The question is layered; George understands this. There's a little itch at the back of his mind that tries to raise the alarms. It tries to resurface the words his date had spilled over a splintered table and forgotten food—the red flags and the lies and the broken promises she'd regaled. And maybe George can admit he's a bit of a fool.

Because he shuts the door on those memories; he hides them away with a lock and key. Out of

sight. And then he's nodding, slow and probably less calculated than the decision should be. Dream hums. The fingers along his shoulder dip down to his waist. "Then turn around and face the wall for me." It's like his body is moving before he even processes it. He shifts until he's staring blankly at the wall, muddled with confusion and nerves strung tight with anticipation. One of Dream's large palms settles hotly on the softness of his stomach. Then, he *pulls*. George lets out an embarrassing squeak when they're tugged flush together, chest to back. Dream's forearm locks around his ribs, possessive in a way he's never experienced. There are puffs of air settling on his neck, rustling shorter hairs and dampening his skin. It's new and so unequivocally *Dream*. And— wow . George really likes it. "This okay?" Dream asks, because of course he does. And George will never admit how much he loves feeling like this—small and pliable and protected. But he manages a tiny, affirmative hum so Dream doesn't pull his flame away. Sleep begins to sprawl through his brain, spiderwebs of sluggishness tugging at dark curtains to cover his vision.

Right before he's about to slip under, Dream says something. It's so *small*— so meek and uncharacteristic George almost convinces himself it isn't Dream's voice.

[&]quot;You won't push me away again tomorrow...right?"



Gummed on.	l lips stretch around a yawn, ruddy cheek nuzzling against the pillow he holds a death g
He shive	rs, when he registers the feeling of something warm ghosting along his throat.
It's gentl	e; it's <i>ticklish</i> .
_	orings his hand up to swat it away lazily, emitting a low groan at being woken up. There agh from somewhere in front of him.
	he reaches out and shoves against whoever or <i>whatever</i> woke him up. They just laugh nd the damn thing on his neck won't <i>fucking</i> move.
	f," he mumbles, pawing at the presence— hand? fingers?— on his throat. He whines loesn't budge.
open his	few moments, but George eventually relents to the knowledge that he should probably eyes. He blinks, once, twice, three times. The blurry world around him settles into claralls unfuzz and gentle sun brightens the comforter wrapped about his torso.
As the ro	oom clears up, so does the view of Dream's face.
feeling o	facing each other, and there's a dopey, boyish smile on the rose petals he remembers n his stomach, his thighs, his chest. Oakwood hair falls in tousled waves along his and nape, glowing golden under the morning light.
One of h	is hands rests on the side of George's throat—thumb tracing little circles where it lies.
George's	s pupils dilate. His lips part, breathing going staccato in his chest.
	you doing" he breathes, eyes half lidded and trained on the movement of the wrist this neck.



Curiosity urges George to shuffle a bit closer. "A reminder that I...?" Dream's Adam's apple bobs up and down as he swallows, and George's heart picks up in his chest. He licks his lips, wetting them like dew on petals. They part, and Dream shakily starts to speak. "George, I—" he sputters. And, because the world continues to subtly torture him, George goes blank. Because there are sudden knocks at the front door. Both men practically jump out of their skin, flinching as a few more follow, harsher than the last. They both blink in unison. The entire dorm falls silent. George curses at himself when a spike of panic races through his veins. Alarm bells sound. Adrenaline shoots every muscle rimrod straight, and he hates it *so much*. His fight or flight sits him upright—fast. Every nerve ending screams for him to escape, run. Because he's in *Dream's* bed with *Dream's* marks and he had sex with a guy last night and *people* are going to know if someone comes in right now and everyone will know he likes it everyone will know he had sex with a man and— "George," Dream murmurs with such recognized haste that it shocks them both. "Calm down,

Click, click, click sounds behind his teeth.

It does little to calm George's trembling body and anxiety-ridden system, but at least his breathing evens out.

sweetheart— it's okay. I locked both the suite's door last night and our own, okay? They can't get

in."



